Bold young adventurers in a strange new world

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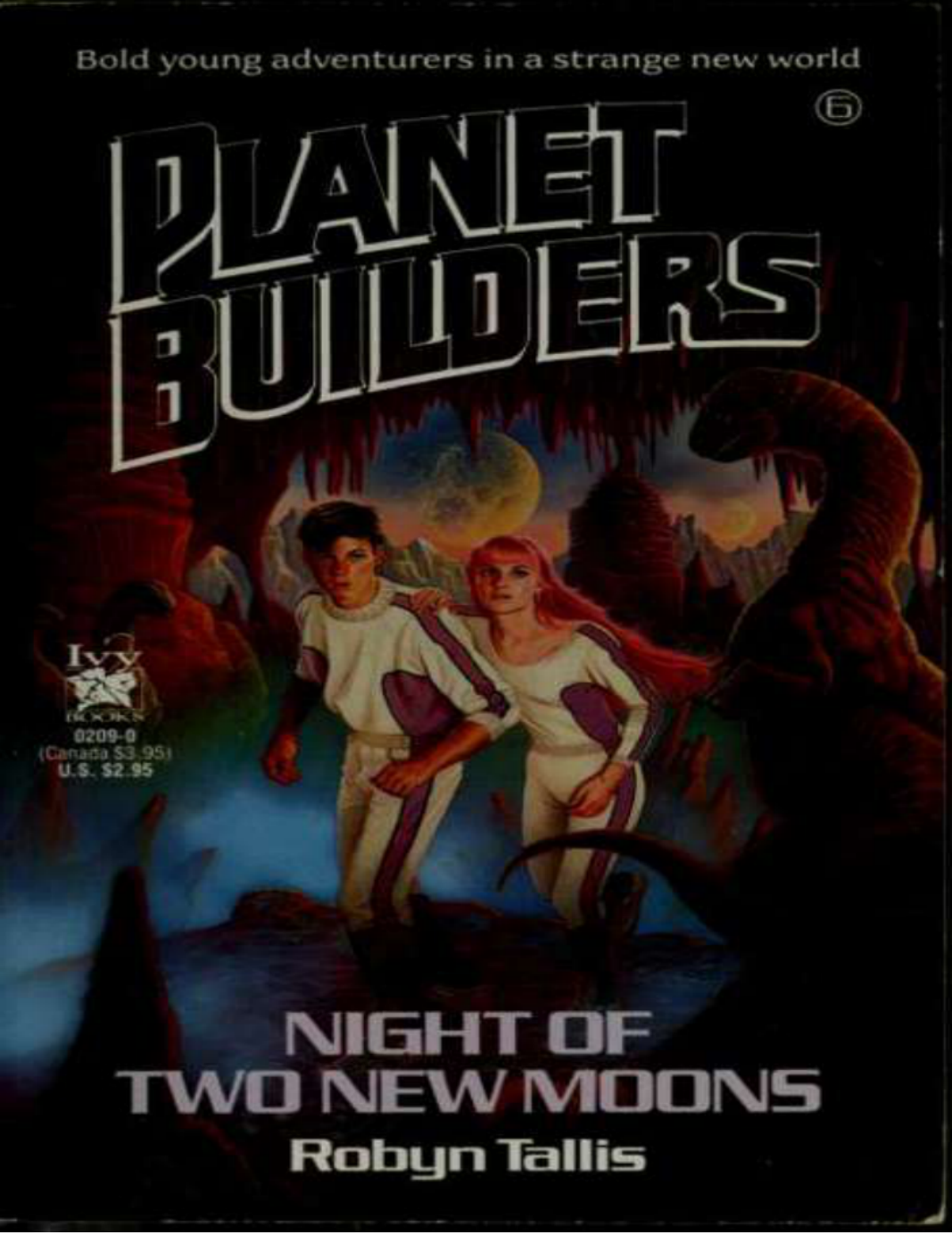
PLANET BUILDERS



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NIGHT OF TWO NEW MOONS

Robyn Tallis

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Sean leaned out of his room and took in the chaos of the Med Dome's hallway. "What *is* going on?" he asked a nurse. "Emergency of some kind?"

"The baby is missing," said the nurse. She sounded close to tears.

Sean looked at her in astonishment. He knew that as the first human baby born on the planet, Will's sister came complete with a heavy symbolic load. Beyond her obvious importance to Will's family, Ginny Riedel-Mornette represented the future of the human race on Gauguin, proof that humankind was here to stay. Logical or not, if something happened to this baby, it would be considered a bad omen. A sense of ill luck would hang over the settlers for years to come.

Sean stepped back into his room, feeling pity for Will and his family and a rising sense of fury at his own helplessness. The feeling lasted no more than a few seconds. He could do something, if only he were willing.

If only. How stupid. He might not like the idea, but he could scarcely refuse to do anything that might help find the baby. Lying on his back, he closed his eyes and invited the visions to come.

They arrived quickly, almost instantly—as if they had been waiting for him.

But what he discovered when they arrived made him wish that he had remained standing out in the hallway with his eyes wide open.

Other books in the PLANET BUILDERS series:

#1: Mountain of Stolen Dreams
#2: Night of Ghosts and Lightning
#3: Rebel from Alphorion
#4: Visions from the Sea
#5: Zero-Sum Games

PLANET BUILDERS

NIGHT OF TWO NEW MOONS

Robyn Tallis

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With thanks to Bruce Coville,Debra Doyle,
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Who built the planet

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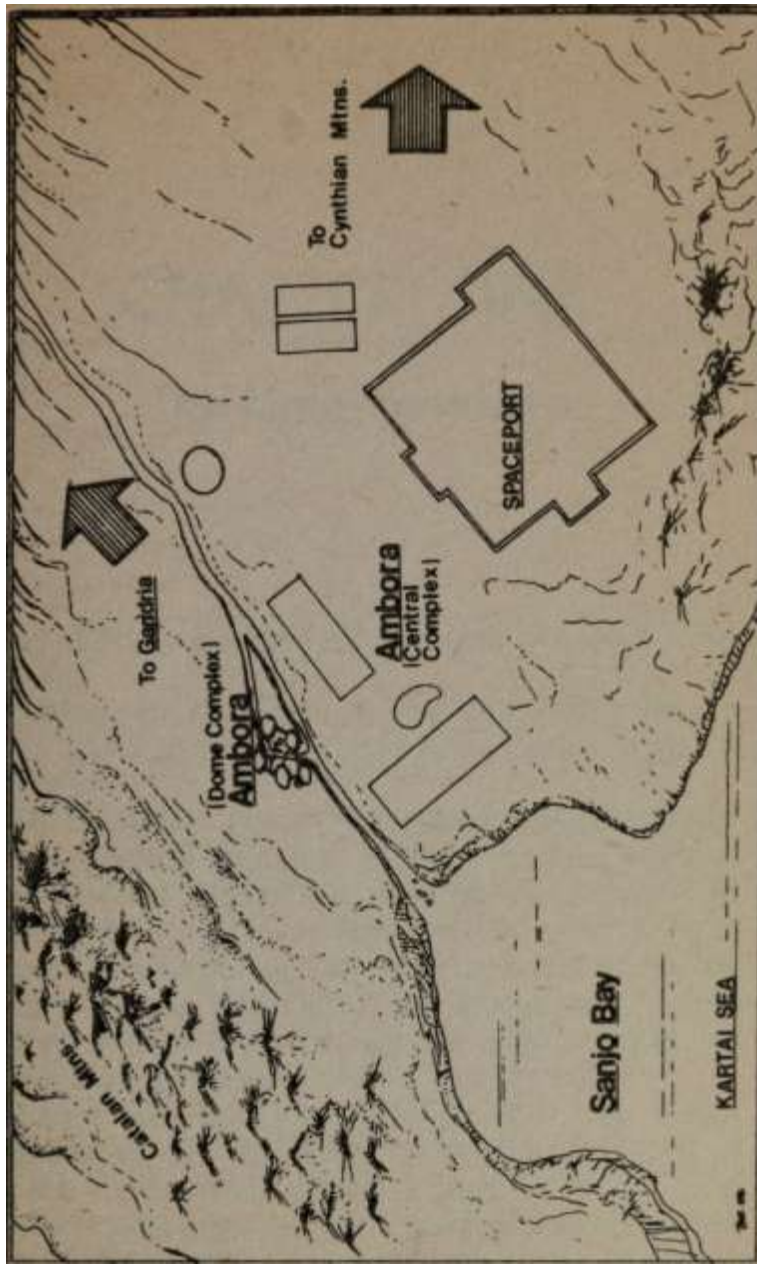
For the lady of Seal Beach



CHAPTER ONE

The Light Fantastic

Sean Matthews closed his eyes and waited for the colors.

Waiting isn't enough, he realized with a shock. They won't just come to me now. I have to reach out to them.

He hesitated. For a while, the strange world of colored lights and gray bubbles he had entered when he had been in the coma had been as real to him as the solid, everyday world in which he had grown up. But during that time he'd had no choice in the matter. The lights had come to him and forced him to look through the gray bubbles, to see things, whether he wanted to or not.

Later, they had taken him to their city, a city that simply did not exist in what Sean thought of as the "real world." It was a place only his mind could reach. And, despite his initial fears, it was a place where he had been safe.

But he wasn't sure that the city of lights was a place to which he wanted to return. Now that his mind and body were healing, he was being given a choice. He knew that the lights—whatever they were—wanted him to come back. But he knew, too, that they would not force him.

It was his choice.

Sean felt his body growing tense.

Relax! he told himself. You know you can't go back if you tighten up.

The thought surprised him. Have I already decided? he wondered.

Indeed, it must be that some part of him had decided, for he could feel himself reaching out, stretching out, whispering without words, here I am. Here I am!

They came to him out of the darkness, the gray bubbles and whirling colored lights that had kept him company inside his head even while his friends, most especially Zach, had been keeping vigil outside. Have to remember to tell Zach how much I appreciated that, thought Sean.

Then all his attention was on the swirling colors as they sent him a message of welcome, a message that came—as always—less in words than in feelings that he had to translate. The lights began to call him, singing him toward their city.

A moment! thought Sean. Give me a moment! For he knew there was something else he could see once he reached this state of mind.

Looking around, he located the solid bars of color he had come to recognize as the auras of his real-world friends. That bar of green, glowing like it held all of spring inside of it, that would be Zach.

And not far from Zach, gold and quiet and lovely, was Clea. A thread of light, a glow of green and yellow, wove between them, flickering and unsteady. Sean was a little uncomfortable seeing that thread. He knew it

represented Zach and Clea's feelings for each other. Somehow it seemed like prying to look at something neither Zach nor Clea had been able to accept or understand yet themselves.

Maybe I ought to tell them how much they like each other, he thought. He slapped the idea away, as he might an annoying insect. Not your business, Matthews, he reprimanded himself.

Turning his attention elsewhere, he saw a thin red column, intense but tenuous, that he recognized as Will Mornette. Not far from Will was a gay swirl of sunshine yellow: the aura of Daphne DeVries. As with Zach and Clea, lines of light danced between Will and Daffy.

Where's Pippa? thought Sean, and instantly his attention was drawn through the blackness to a bar of blue light as steady and constant as Gauguin's blue sun—and as warm inside, though it was wrapped in a sheath of light that was the blue of ice and winter. Philippa's aura was by far the most starkly isolated image of the group. It was surrounded by blackness, save for a single strand of light stretched from her to a warm orange glow that Sean recognized as Arkady Davidov.

Only one more to find—the most important of all: Noriko Wilder. The moment Sean thought of Noriko, one of the gray bubbles found her. He felt a surge of warmth as he "saw" the dazzling electric blue of her aura, a blue woven to his own deep

green aura by a net of light that overwhelmed him with joy.

She was coming his way; the city of lights would have to wait.

The swirling lights signaled their disappointment.

I'll come back, Sean communicated to them. / promise.

He could sense the sorrow of the lights as they disappeared into the darkness, leaving him alone and waiting.

Sorrow, and one thing more. He hesitated, unwilling to put a name to the feeling. But there was no mistaking it.

The feeling was fear.

CHAPTER TWO

Current Events

It's time we got some answers, thought Noriko Wilder.

Summoning her courage, the short, dark-haired girl walked along the curving corridor that led to Sean Matthews's room in the Med Dome. When she reached the door, Noriko hesitated for a moment, then rapped lightly on its smooth, white surface.

No answer.

She took a breath, then pushed the door open slowly. Peering in, she saw Sean sitting in a padded chair beside his hospital bed. The stubble of black hair covering his head was even shorter than the buzz-cut she herself had sported when she first arrived here on Gauguin. Like most of Earth's far-flung people, Sean's skin was usually a pleasant nut-brown color. But Sean's time in the

hospital had left him unnaturally pale. A blue hospital blanket covered his legs. His eyes were closed, and he was so still that for one heartstopping instant Noriko wondered if he was dead.

Stepping closer, she relaxed as she saw Sean's eyes moving beneath the closed lids. Without speaking, she sat on the edge of the bed to wait.

"Afternoon, Wilder," said Sean after a few seconds.

He had not opened his eyes.

Noriko shivered. Despite her physical bravery, she still found the unexplained mental current that bound her to Sean and six other young people here on Gauguin disturbing.

Sean opened his eyes. His long black lashes were a frame for the clear whites and the deep green irises,

"I wish you wouldn't do that," said Noriko.

He closed his eyes again.

She laughed. "Open your eyes, you toroid. That's not what I meant, and you know it. I wish you wouldn't 'read the current'—or whatever you call it—to figure out when I come through the door."

Sean shrugged. "I don't always have a choice," he said. "I was doing something else and I just became aware of you."

"Doing whatV asked Noriko.

"Thinking," he said, and by the tone in his voice Noriko knew that he didn't really want to say about what. She felt her stomach tighten. How had she let herself get so involved with a guy who had so much trouble sharing his feelings?

Actually, her friend Daphne had already ex-

plained that. "It's easy," she had told Noriko. "The two of you are exactly

alike. The problem is, you don't want to admit it."

Noriko had been annoyed to realize Daffy was right: she and Sean were alike in many ways. For example, their tendency to take things into their own hands—which in Sean's case was part of what had landed him here in the Med Dome.

"Sit closer," said Sean. He motioned to a chair at the foot of the bed. Noriko pulled it beside him. Once she was sitting he reached out and took her hand.

She stared at him for a moment, trying to sort through the complicated feelings that being with him created in her.

"So, when are they going to let you out?" she asked before the silence became too uncomfortable.

He shrugged. "Sometime in the next couple of days," he replied. "Though Doctor Smedjen has already told me he wants me to take things easy for the next several months."

She searched his face for signs of rebellion but was surprised to see that he seemed relatively calm at the prospect. Not like the firebrand I know, she thought.

"And how was your day?" he asked.

"Pretty lousy," said Noriko, obviously distressed. "Everyone's still in an uproar about what happened up in High Station. I mean, I seem to be getting the worst of it, but they're also giving the third degree to everyone else who's part of the current."

Sean grinned. "That shouldn't be any surprise.

When you unmask a smuggling conspiracy and manage to stage your showdown with the bad guys in the High Station at the same time that half the colony's bigwigs are up there to watch a big freeball game, you can't expect everyone just to forget about it the next day."

"But why are they hassling us?" exclaimed Nori-ko. "We're not the criminals."

"Ah," said Sean wisely. "You have to remember the only thing that bothers official types more than having people do the wrong thing is having people do the wrong thing and get the right results. You guys should have been in school and left all this police work to the colony officials."

"But they never would have caught the smugglers!" objected Noriko angrily.

Sean shrugged. "And no one would have known that our enforcement types were sleeping on the job. You have to admit, you really showed them up. I know how they feel. I'm still angry that you did it while I was stuck in this stupid sickroom." When she started to protest, he added hastily, "Just joking!" He paused, then squeezed her hand. "Are they really hassling you?" he asked.

Noriko frowned. "Mostly just a lot of nasty questions. As usual, they don't really believe what we're telling them. Not that we're telling them everything,"

she added significantly.

She waited for Sean to ask what they were leaving out of their testimony, since most of the information they were sitting on concerned him and the mysterious way he had become involved in the battle even though he was stuck in the Med Dome. But all he did was nod his head.

She resisted the urge to shout at him and continued her report. "Today I was assigned a lawyer to 'protect my rights.'"

Sean grimaced. "When a girl as short as you puts six guys in the hospital, someone's bound to start asking questions."

Noriko made a face at him. "I didn't spend a lifetime learning karate and aikido just to keep it to myself when someone tries to kill me and my friends," she said angrily.

"Hey, I'm not complaining!" protested Sean. "Just teasing a little."

"The worst of it is Santori," Noriko continued. "He's been all over us like slime fungus on a rock—which is how I think of him."

Sean nodded. "I've been to school on five planets, and he's the most obnoxious assistant principal I've ever seen."

"He keeps dragging us into his office and interrogating us," said Noriko. "Like we're prisoners or something!"

"I wonder if Dr. Ives knows what Santori is up to."

Noriko shrugged. "He may be too tied up with other problems to keep an eye on Santori." She hesitated, then finally added what had been on her mind all along. "A lot of Santori's questions are about your part in all this."

Sean was silent.

"Of course, it's easy to fend those off," she said, "since none of us know what's really going on with you."

Sean could hear the anger in her voice. He tightened his grip on her hand and said, "Look, I

know you think I'm closing you out, but I'm not sure you really want to know what's going on inside me. I'm not sure / want to know."

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asked, but her tone was gentle. Though she wasn't trying to read the current, the fact that Sean was deeply disturbed was coming through loud and clear.

He hesitated. "It's hard to talk about it," he said. "Sometimes I feel like—"

A loud knock interrupted Sean's words. Before either of them could answer, Sean's father strode into the room. His eyes narrowed for just a moment when he saw Noriko. Despite his polite greeting, Noriko didn't need any extra-sensory powers to perceive that Governor Matthews was less than thrilled at seeing her. She stayed for a few minutes, but the conversation was strained and uncomfortable. As soon as she felt it was polite, she stood up. Only a little more than a meter and a half tall, she seemed doll-like next to the tall governor.

"I have to get over to my aikido practice," she said. Immediately she regretted the words, which could only remind the governor of the trouble in

which she had recently been involved.

Governor Matthews nodded. "It was nice to see you," he responded, his voice polite but empty of any real feeling.

As she headed out the door, Noriko felt a mental tug from Sean; no words, only a feeling.

Come back soon! it said as clearly as if he had actually spoken out loud.

Will Mornette could feel his naturally ruddy cheeks

grow even redder as Daphne DeVries pushed her perma-dyed magenta hair away from her face and fixed him with what he had come to think of as "The Look." "The Look" didn't have anything to do with the tricks some girls used to get their way; it was just that when Daphne looked him right in the eye, it was almost impossible for him to tell her "No" about anything.

He decided to try anyway. "You don't understand, Daff," he said. "This telekinesis stuff isn't something I can just turn on and off. I don't have much control over it. I've hardly had any success in the lab."

He paused to get control of his temper. The fact that he was being tested for the ability to move objects without touching them still made him angry, since it would never have happened if his stepbrother Paul had just kept his big mouth shut.

Daphne blew a stray strand of bright hair away from her forehead. "I know it makes you feel like a freak," she said. "But let's face it—everyone connected to the current is a freak. Which is one of the reasons I'm so interested in the whole thing. I want to know if the rest of us are going to start developing TK, too."

Will shrugged. "I'd say the odds are fifty-fifty. It may be some side effect of having grown up on Acedium—you know, like the way people who grow up on Galahad develop empathic powers. I haven't told them about the current at the lab. And I'm not about to!" he added before Daphne could say anything. "You know how we've been treated the few times we've tried to tell anyone about all this. I've got enough troubles as it is."

Daphne wrinkled her nose. "Well, try it anyway," she urged. "Come on. Just think how useful it would be if you could get it under control. And I know you can do it. After all, I saw—"

She stopped, and Will knew that she was remembering how he'd used his telekinetic powers during the battle in High Station, knocking a laser gun from one enemy's hand, and actually hurtling another out of the way.

"That's a perfect example of what I've been trying to say. I wasn't really even thinking about using the power then. We were in so much trouble it just sort of happened."

"But it proves you can do it!" insisted Daphne.

Will sighed. "All right, I'll try," he said, relenting.

Her smile seemed to light up the Greendomes Cafe. "Here, I'll set up an experiment," she offered, reaching out to arrange the remains of the snack they had been sharing. "These will be a gate," she said, setting two spice

shakers about a hand-span apart. She placed a pitless peach about ten centimeters in front of the spice shakers. "Okay," she said. "Send the peach through the gate."

Will looked down at the arrangement before him and sighed again. He placed his long, slender hands flat on the table in front of him. Closing his eyes, he began to concentrate.

"Nothing yet," said Daphne.

Will grimaced and tried to increase his concentration. A dull pain began to throb at the back of his head.

"Come on, Will," said Daphne. "You can do it. I know you can."

Will redoubled his effort. Though he didn't

particularly want to do this, he didn't want to let Daphne down. When his hands began to tremble, Daphne placed her right hand over his. Suddenly she cried out in astonishment.

Will opened his eyes just in time to see the peach fly between the spice shakers, hurtle straight across the snack bar, and smash into the far wall. The impact sent gobs of juice and fruit pulp flying in all directions.

Daphne squeezed his hand. "Let's get out of here before they figure out where that came from," she whispered. As she spoke the spice shakers began to rotate slowly around one another, as though they had begun some stately dance.

Eyes wide, Will nodded. Unfolding himself from behind the table, he rose to his full two-meter height. Daphne grabbed her wide-brimmed hat and slammed it on her head. Its large, white plume waved behind her as she headed for the door.

On the table the spice shakers continued to dance, ceasing their grave gavotte only when the two teens had left the room.

Sixteen-year-old Arkady Davidov put down the piece of machinery he had been carrying and wiped his brow. Despite the strength created by a childhood spent on the heavy gravity planet Theta, he was finding this new work assignment tough.

"Davidov!" called a sharp voice. "Stop slacking off and get that filter box over here!"

Arkady remembered what Sean had said about his own drudge rotation here in Maintenance—

how the supervisor, Pieter Suvin, had been on his back every day, making his life miserable.

Is this guy just a creep? thought Arkady, running a grease-stained hand through his short, blond hair. Or does he have a particular grudge against our group?

Since he couldn't figure out any reason why that should be, he dropped the matter. Hoisting the metal box, he carried it to where Suvin stood waiting.

"It's about time," the supervisor said sharply as Arkady set the piece of machinery in place. "Now get on over there with the Blue Crew. They can use

an extra hand."

Arkady's handsome face remained placid, giving no sign of the anger he felt toward Suvin. Rubbing his aching arms, he moved to the new assignment, well aware that he would be too exhausted by this evening to spend much time with Philippa Bidding.

Not that it would make that much difference to her, he thought grimly. Since the death of Miguel Arcaro, Philippa's ex-boyfriend—a death that had occurred while Miguel was helping Philippa and Arkady escape from dangerous malium smugglers—she had been even more withdrawn than usual. Despite how well they had been getting along in the weeks prior to that tragedy, Arkady was beginning to wonder if Philippa had been dreaming of Miguel all along. It was not a pleasant idea.

Maybe I should talk to Clea, he thought. An empath from Galahad, Clea always seemed to understand what the others in the current were

feeling. Of course, Zach was also an empath. But maybe Clea—

He was jolted out of his daydreaming by a message from Sean. "Need to see your it said. "Come by after drudge. "

Arkady closed his eyes. Now how did Sean do that? he wondered in astonishment. He shook his head. In the past, the mysterious "current" had allowed the eight of them to know each others' locations, and often to sense how everyone was feeling. By working together, they could even—sometimes—send specific messages. But this was the first time anyone had actually used the current to send him what seemed like a casual message.

/ suppose I shouldn't be too surprised, thought Arkady. The current has been getting stronger all along.

He tried to avoid touching the other, more frightening idea—that Sean was changing, too. But it was true. Ever since he had come out of his coma, Sean had been acting strange. More than strange, thought Arkady, if you counted the events that occurred the night Miguel died. Though it was hard to believe, Arkady was convinced he had heard a theskie speak to him with Sean's voice that night. Like several other things he had seen and heard at the time, it was too weird to understand, especially for someone as solid and practical as Arkady. So for the time being he simply refused to think about it.

Arkady was trying to decide whether to attempt sending a message back to Sean when he was returned to the moment at hand by the sharp voice of Pieter Suvin. "Davidov, stop daydreaming

and get back to work! Otherwise, I might have to write you up. I'd keep on my toes, if I were you, kid. You're in enough trouble with Santori already."

Arkady began to move, reflecting that it was probably a good thing he didn't have highly developed mental powers. If he did, he might fry Suvin first, and worry about it later.

CHAPTER THREE

Couples

Zach Yamoto lay sprawled atop a large rock outside the Greendome Complex. Nestled beside him was a quufer. The fluffy, pillow-shaped animal seemed to be dozing though it was hard to say for certain, since the only way to find a quufer's head was by watching it walk.

A light breeze played around the edges of Zach's shoulder-length brown hair as he soaked up the warm rays of Gauguin's blue sun.

Eyes closed, the wiry teenager was concentrating intensely. Okay, she's leaving the central dome . . . walking through the tunnel that connects it to the seedling dome . . . heading for the west exit . . .

He sat up, crossed one leg over the other, and leaned back on his elbows to watch Clea Tourni walk out of the Greendomes. She was wearing a

shortsleeve boorman, the simple one-piece outfit favored by many of Gauguin's colonists. Zach smiled, appreciating the way its burnt-orange color complemented Clea's brownish skin and amber hair. He waited until she was directly opposite the rock, then cried, "Greetings, fair Galahadan!"

Clea looked up in surprise. "Zach! What are you doing here?"

Zach studied her carefully: She appeared pleased to see him.

"Just wanted to talk to you," he said, sliding down from the rock. "Ever since all the commotion last week it's been almost impossible for any of us to get together. And it's not just because they're always dragging people off for questioning. Whoever's setting up the drudge schedule has managed to split the group up pretty well, not just with jobs, but with shifts."

Clea nodded. "That's been bothering me, too," she said.

Zach fell into step beside her. "Actually, I'm stretching things just being here," he continued, "since my shift in the Med Dome is supposed to begin in slightly less time than it's going to take to walk there." His eyes gleamed mischievously.

Clea's face, slender but pretty, clouded with concern. "Won't you get in trouble?" she asked.

Zach shook his head, smiling. "I've got it all covered," he said. "A perfect Yamoto five-part scheme."

Clea laughed. "I shudder to think of it," she said. "The last time you cooked up five overlapping excuses, I thought your mother was going to put

you in a box and ship you out on the first vessel that came within three light years of this place."

"Please," objected Zach, placing a hand on his heart. "Let us not dwell overmuch on the past."

They had come to one of the footbridges that crossed the Tati River at the

upper edge of Am-bora. A pair of theskies sunning themselves at the edge of the water looked up as the teens stepped onto the bridge.

"Ack!" cried the smaller theskie. It sounded cranky.

Zach laughed. "I wish that wasn't their favorite sound," he said. "Every time one of them says it, I think they're trying to talk to me."

"They do sound like they're actually saying something a lot of the time, don't they?" Clea agreed. When she'd first come to Gauguin, it had taken weeks for her to accept the fact that while theskies were gifted mimics, the degree of their intelligence was somewhere between that of a cat and a parrot. They were able to use human words, and sometimes they even put together entire sentences, but they rarely made any sense.

"Rock-a-bye!" cried the smaller theskie. "Rock-a-bye, rock-a-bye, ack ack ack!"

The larger theskie stood and walked over to the end of the bridge. Though the creature was about as long as Will Mornette was tall, its head came only higher than Zach's waist. Still, with it's powerful hind legs and fierce front claws—not to mention its fangs—it would have been frightening to someone who didn't know how friendly the animals really were.

Zach reached out and scratched the feathery-looking scales at the back of the theskie's head. "Ack!" it said. Then, repeating its partner, it croaked, "Rock-a-bye, rock-a-bye! Ack!"

"Now where do you suppose it learned that?" asked Clea.

Zach shrugged. "Who knows? Will was telling me his father has decided they can pick up human words from each other. You'd better watch yourself. If you say something private in front of one of them, it could be all over the city by the next morning."

"Ugh," groaned Clea. "What a horrible thought!"

Zach looked at her and wondered, as he often had over the last few months, if the empathic abilities that made her extra sensitive to other people's emotions had also made her afraid of her own feelings. In fact, now that his mother was helping him develop his own empathic abilities, he was beginning to wonder the same thing about himself.

"Come on," he said gruffly. "I'd better get back to the Med Dome. My five-part masterpiece won't keep me off the hook forever."

Arkady entered a small booth made of silanna, a translucent building material processed on Gauguin, and punched the Bidding family's comm-code into the keypad.

"Yes?" asked a wary voice, shortly after the third beep.

"Pippa? It's me—Arkady."

"Just a sec!" she said, and Arkady was pleased to note that her voice sounded considerably more

cheerful after he had announced himself. He heard a click, and a film of light shimmered over the booth's view screen. A fraction of a second later he could see Philippa's face.

Although her cream-pale complexion was almost unnatural in a time when the human races had blended to a nearly uniform shade of brown, Philippa Bidding was still an extraordinarily beautiful girl. Her hair, long and nearly white, hung over one shoulder in a braid. Her fine features were set in their usual mask, the blank expression she used to keep the world at bay. Someone who didn't know her might have thought she was freezing him out. But Arkady caught the brief moment in which her large, wide-set blue eyes betrayed the fact that she was glad to see him.

Tm here," he said. The words were part of an unmentioned code they had begun to develop—in this case, an invitation for her to talk to him about whatever was bothering her. It was all he would say. He knew better than to press her when she was in one of these moods; it would only drive her deeper into herself.

For Arkady, Philippa's near inability to turn to anyone for help was the most difficult aspect of being involved with her. He understood it very well—he was that way himself. But he couldn't help wanting to make everything all right for her. He knew he couldn't, that she wouldn't let him. But it didn't stop him from wanting to.

"I'll be fine," she said.

Meaning you don't want to talk about it, thought Arkady glumly. But aloud he simply said, "I hope you'll still feel that way after I tell you I have to

break our date. Or maybe I hope you won't. Tell me, Dr. Bidding—how should I hope you react?"

A slight smile twitched at the corner of Pippa's mouth. "You should hope I don't come over and clobber you," she replied. "What is it this time? Extra drudge? Or another woman?"

"Are there other females on Gauguin?" queried Arkady in astonishment. "I really don't think I've noticed."

"You've been hanging around Zach too long," said Philippa. "You're starting to sound too slick for your own good. Now tell me what's going on, so I can figure out whether or not I'm mad!"

Arkady frowned. "To tell you the truth, I'm not exactly sure what it is. I got a message from Sean, asking me to come see him as soon as I got off drudge."

"Did he tell you what it was about?"

Arkady shook his head. "It was a pretty brief message." He hesitated, then added, "It came over the current."

Philippa wrinkled her brow. "Words or feelings?"

"A little bit of both, though mostly words," answered Arkady. "But so clear he might as well have been standing next to me, whispering in my ear." He shivered at the memory. "It was weird."

"The current is weird," said Philippa. "But we already knew it was getting stronger. What I want to know is, how much stronger is it going to get? I don't really want the rest of you living in my head on a full-time basis."

"That's not the only question," Arkady persisted. "Sean was the one who resisted it most to

begin with, and the one who was least able to use it. Now he's doing stuff we didn't even think was possible. What's going on with him?"

Philippa frowned. "Who knows? I didn't even know what was going on with him even when I was dating him."

Arkady's face remained impassive. Though he would rather forget that Philippa had once been Sean's girlfriend, he knew it was pointless to dwell on the past. Besides, it wasn't Sean he was worried about. It was Miguel Arcaro —or to be more precise, the memory of Miguel Arcaro. Not easy having to compete with the memory of a dead man, he thought. Especially when it's someone who once saved your life.

He forced the idea out of his head. "Anyway," he continued, "I'm on my way over to find out what Sean has on his mind. If it doesn't take too long, shall I call you back?"

"Call me back no matter how long it takes," she said.

Arkady nodded and managed to keep himself from asking if she wanted him to call back because she wanted to talk to him, or because she wanted to know what was going on with Sean.

Justine, the larger of Gauguin's two moons, was sinking toward the horizon as Zach and Clea crossed a small bridge that gave them a clear view of Ambora. The five great domes of the city looked like enormous half-bubbles resting on the land. The rich light of early gloaming seemed to deepen the varied earth tones of the expanded silanna structures.

"You know," said Clea, "I think that thing actually looks better that way,"

"The moon?" asked Zach incredulously.

Clea laughed. "Not the moon, you goof. The Med Dome."

"Ah, the Med Dome," said Zach wisely. "I should have realized. But you forget that despite my best efforts, I still haven't learned to read your mind."

Clea felt her cheeks grow warm. Does he mean that? she thought in sudden panic. At the same time she felt a wave of distress from Zach.

He knows he shouldn't have said it, she thought, and felt her cheeks grow even warmer as she wondered if that knowledge meant she was reading his mind.

No, it's not mind reading! she told herself firmly. But what was the difference between the highly developed empathy that let her detect people's feelings, and actually reading their thoughts? / don't want to think about it, she told herself, slamming up the mental barriers her mother had been teaching her to erect.

"You know, I think you're right," Zach continued, returning to her initial remark. "The repair lines break it up a bit."

Extending his thumbs, he held up his hands as if to frame the image of the Med Dome. The smooth swirls of brown, orange, and ochre were separated by a jagged line that marked where a huge section of the dome had been blown

away during a fierce ion storm. Though the new silanna the colonists had used to repair the dome had fused perfectly with the raw edge of the original structure, the jagged line where old and new met was marked by

a stark break in the color patterns. Several other domes carried the same kind of marking.

"Besides," continued Zach, realizing that she was now blocking him, "they make a nice reminder of the night the city almost blew away." In the distance, a figure waved. As if to distract them both, he pointed ahead and added, "Look, there's Arkady! If we hurry, we can catch him before he goes into the dome."

"Good idea," said Clea, eager for anything that would break the tension of the moment.

"Hey, Davidov!" called Zach, beginning to run. "Wait for us!"

Arkady paused at the door of the Med Dome to let Zach and Clea catch up to him. "Hasn't your shift started?" he asked, glancing at his watch as the two trotted up.

"Had a slight delay," said Zach cheerfully. "I'll make it up at the other end."

Arkady shook his head in mock astonishment, but whatever he was going to say was interrupted by the abrupt arrival of a hovercar piloted by a very frightened looking Will Mornette.

"Zach!" he cried. "Thank goodness you're here. I need your help."

Alongside the River Tati, the larger of the two theskies Zach and Clea had passed earlier stood scratching its mate's back in a ritual grooming gesture. Suddenly both theskies cocked their heads to the side, as if they'd heard something.

The smaller theskie darted into the bushes. A moment later it re-emerged, carrying a quufer in its front claws.

Gabbling quietly, the two theskies began trotting along the edge of the river. The color of the quufer's slender, hairlike scales seemed to shift back and forth between the orange of contentment and the green of alarm.

Soon the larger theskie ducked into the brush alongside the path. The smaller theskie followed.

A few meters from the path, they stopped in front of a group of quufers gathered on a rocky ledge.

Moving carefully, the larger theskie picked up one of the quufers.

Holding their passengers carefully, the two theskies began to run toward the city, making sure to stay far back in the brush, where they would not be seen by human eyes.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Magic Number

Zach sprinted toward the hovercar, which was held a few centimeters above the ground by a yellow pressor beam emanating from its base. Clea and Arkady followed close on his heels.

"It's my stepmother!" Will exclaimed when Zach had reached the car. "She's going to have the baby. Nowr

For the first time, Zach noticed Laura Riedel-Mornette sitting in the back of the hovercar. She was panting regularly, massaging her stomach as she did. Her eyes were closed and she appeared to be deep in concentration.

All of a sudden she seemed to relax. She blew out sharply and opened her eyes.

"Hi, Zach," she said cheerfully.

Zach glanced at Will.

Mrs. Riedel-Mornette laughed. "Don't mind

him," she said, nodding toward her stepson. "He's just a little panicked. Ifs the first time he's ever had to drive a pregnant woman to the hospital. We're not in emergency mode yet. But I wouldn't mind a little help climbing out of this thing. These seats were not made for women about to give birth."

"Do you want to walk, or do you want a floater?" Zach askf*d

"Oh, I'll walk," said Mrs. Riedel-Mornette. "We'll save the dramatic stuff for later."

"Are you sure, Mom?" asked Will, shifting in his seat. Zach noticed that his friend's voice was pitched a tone or two higher than usual. Wow, he thought. Will really is nervous.

"Why, Will," said Mrs. Riedel-Mornette. "I think that's the first time you've ever called me 'Mom.' Thank you, dear. And don't worry, I'll be just fine. You did a good job. Now, if you'll just get Paul and your father for me, I'll be quite happy. Whoops! Hold on just a minute, Zach."

She closed her eyes and began to massage her stomach again.

Zach stood close to Will's stepmother, ready to catch her if she should fall, but otherwise not wanting to interfere as she coped with the contraction. As the oldest of six children, Zach Yamoto had been given ample opportunity to observe the behavior of a pregnant woman. And as an apprentice at the Med Dome, he had been included in the ongoing preparations for the time when Laura Riedel-Mornette would give birth to the colony's first baby—preparations that had taught him enough to know that for now, at least,

Will's stepmother was well in control of the situation.

Making an effort to keep his voice calm—although he wasn't really worried, the situation was still exciting—Zach said, "Clea, why don't you go

ahead and let the duty medics know that we'll be coming in soon. Arkady, stand by in case I need a hand here."

"What about me?" asked Will plaintively.

Zach flashed him a lopsided grin. "I think you should do just what your stepmother asked. Go find your dad. He's going to want to be here for this."

"That's a good idea, Will," said Mrs. Riedel-Mornette with a gasp. "Zach, I think I'm ready to go inside now. Thank you, Will. And don't worry, I'll be just fine."

Eyes wide, Will Mornette watched as Zach and Arkady escorted his stepmother into the Med Dome. Then he spun the hovercar around and sped off to find his father.

Trying to appear casual, fourteen-year-old Paul Riedel wandered into the Rec Dome. Unaware that his mother was about to provide a new half-sibling about a month ahead of schedule, he was following a vague hope that he might have a chance to speak to the light of his life, Daphne DeVries.

Paul was well aware that Daphne was officially his stepbrother's girlfriend. But he had never quite recovered from his first sight of her. The image of her standing at the ballet barre, her magenta hair unbound and tumbling to her waist, seemed permanently etched in his memory.

Trying to appear casual, he peeked into the dance room.

It was empty.

Paul sighed. Wherefore art thou, Daphne? he thought, adapting a phrase he had once heard her use when she was discussing some ancient play with that crazy Zach Yamoto.

Paul always thought of her as Daphne, of course. Daffy—the nickname most of the other kids used— was unbearably silly. When he rounded a corner and almost bumped into her, he thought for a moment that his heart was going to stop.

"Hi, Paul!" Daphne greeted him cheerfully. "Say, did you and the other kids ever finish that holotape you were working on?"

"Not actually," said Paul, feeling his cheeks grow warm. "But it wasn't really my fault. The other kids got bored with it. Tris Yamoto wants to start working again, but we need some more stuff." He fumbled in his pocket for a list. "He wants some more holotape, a costume for a dancing girl, three swords, and a trailer hitch."

Daphne began to laugh. "I certainly hope you guys are going to invite me to the premiere of this masterpiece. Come on, I'll help you get some of the stuff you need—though you may be on your own when it comes to that trailer hitch."

Daphne's father ran the colony's Recreation Program, and though she usually drew drudge in other areas, she also functioned as an unofficial assistant here in the Rec Dome.

"So tell me," she said as they began walking toward the supply room. "What tidbits have you brought me today?"

Paul blushed with pleasure. For the last few months he had been providing Daphne with random pieces of scientific information he thought she might find interesting. It was the first time in his life that his brilliance, and his interest in science, had helped him get along with someone.

"Well," he began, doing a mental scan of the topics he had prepared for discussion, "the latest readings we have indicate that the Fault Finders are doing their jobs. Which means no earthquakes for a while."

"That's good!" said Daphne.

"And the bio team has discovered seven new major species in the north. I got that one from my stepfather."

Instantly he regretted that last sentence. Mentioning his stepfather was only a degree away from mentioning his stepbrother. And the last thing he wanted to do was make Daphne think about Will. He decided to shift the conversation in another direction.

"Here's one you'll probably like," he added, trying not to sound too desperate. "Next week we'll have two new moons—the first time that's happened since we've been here."

"What does that mean?" asked Daphne.

"Well, other than times when it was cloudy, this will be the darkest night we've ever had. If it's clear, you should have the best view of the stars you're ever likely to get. It will also create the lowest low tide we've ever had. Considering the formation of the seabed, it should expose areas

that have been underwater since the first team arrived."

"Why, Paul!" exclaimed Daphne enthusiastically. "That's fantastic!"

"It is?" asked Paul, a bit dazzled by the light of her smile.

"It certainly is," she replied. "YouVe just given me an idea."

Paul grinned. He knew that when Daphne had an idea, life was likely to get interesting fast.

Arkady Davidov eased himself into the chair next to Sean's bed. "I got your message, Matthews. How are you doing?"

"Not bad," said Sean. "In fact, judging from the way you're moving, I may be in better shape than you are at the moment. I'm supposed to get out of this place tomorrow. But you look like you ought to check in. What's wrong?"

Arkady winced. "I'm just a little stiff from drudge. I've been assigned to your old friend, Pieter Suvin. You weren't kidding when you said he was tough."

"The man is slug slime," said Sean. "If he gets out of line, complain."

"You never did," said Arkady. "Except to us."

"I couldn't." Sean's tone held a touch of bitterness. "You know the rule: The governor's son has to take his lumps just like everyone else—even if his lumps are twice as big. But that's no reason for you to put up with being mistreated. Considering those Thetan-trained muscles, I'd say if you re lame, Suvin must really be abusing you."

"I'll live," Arkady replied with a shrug.

Sean smiled. "Your brain is as muscle-bound as your body, Davidov."

Arkady smiled back. "Not so muscle-bound that I'm not curious. I didn't stop by just to chat. You called me, remember? So what's up?"

Sean closed his eyes. "Problems," he muttered after a moment. "Lots of problems. And mostly ones that no one can give me a hand with."

Arkady said nothing. He knew it was hard for Sean to ask for help. His friend would have to do this his own way.

Without opening his eyes, Sean went on angrily, "The Planetary League is trying to take the colony away from my father."

"That wasn't what I expected to hear," said Arkady, trying not to sound startled. "What's going on?" *

Sean sighed. "Too many 'irregularities.' This mess-up in High Station was the last straw, of course. But according to Dad, his administration has been piling up points for a long time."

"Points?"

"Well, something like that. As governor, Dad has to file reports with the League on everything that goes on around here. And as you well know, there's been a lot of weird stuff going on, starting with that time in the mountains."

Arkady nodded. He clearly remembered the night when he and Sean, along with Clea, Philippa, Zach, and Will, had followed a mysterious message that urged them to "come and bear witness." The call had led them to the top of a plateau, where they had shared a vision of the death of an ancient city. Though they could not be certain,

they had always suspected that the mysterious telepathic current that linked them together was somehow connected to that vision. This idea took on added strength when Noriko and Daphne had shared a similar experience while deepsea diving, and had then become part of the current as well.

The problem was, no one outside the group believed any of that. The plateau was destroyed in an earthquake. And the entire story of the calling and the crystal mechanism that had contained the vision was so strange that the few people they had tried to tell had decided the kids had shared a hallucination brought on by the stress of being lost in the wilderness.

"Sure, no one believed it," said Sean when Arkady pointed this out. "But even so, Dad had to file a report—as he did on the hoverscooters we wrecked that night in the storm, and the reports we made on theskie poaching. And that's just the stuff we've been involved with. When you add in things like the buildings that blew away during that ion storm, you can imagine what Gauguin's record looks like to the honchos at League Headquarters."

"But none of that stuff was your dad's fault," Arkady argued.

Throwing aside his blanket, Sean slid out of bed into his hoverchair. "It happened while Dad was in charge," he countered, touching a button at the chair's side.

Arkady watched as Sean rode the chair to one end of the room, then spun it around so he was heading back—almost as if he was pacing. His handsome

face was dark with anger.

"The computer that monitors the incoming reports assigns a planet 'trouble points/ based on whatever goes on there," continued Sean. "Even though you guys caught those smugglers, that incident pushed Gauguin well past the magic number that says 'time for some special attention/" He smiled bitterly. "The League does not take malium smuggling lightly. So they're sending someone in to investigate."

Moving stiffly, Arkady went to stand beside his friend. "Your father can't help but notice that you Ve been at the center of most of the stuff that's bringing them here," he said. "He must be really steamed."

"Actually, Dad's being pretty good about it," said Sean. "Of course, he'd be a lot happier if none of it had ever happened. But once you guys actually nabbed those malium miners, he had to start believing us. I think he's a little embarrassed that he didn't before."

"I'm not sure I understand the problem," said Arkady. "If they've finally decided we're not all crazy, they have to see that none of this is your dad's fault, either."

"Fault isn't the key word here," said Sean. "It's responsibility. My father is responsible for the whole colony. And this colony still has a big problem. If he can't solve it before the PL guys show up, they'll probably relieve him of his position."

"You mean fire him?" Arkady sounded shocked. "But that's not fair! Your father is a good governor. I've heard Commander Yamoto say your dad is the best governor he's ever seen. And the commander

has served with the Planetary League for almost thirty years/'

"This is a political thing," Sean explained. "Which means that logic—and fairness—are only part of the equation. And small part at that."

Arkady snorted. Then he remembered what Sean had said a few moments earlier. "You mentioned a big problem that your father had to solve. What did you mean?"

"We still don't know who was in charge of the whole smuggling operation," said Sean. "According to what Daphne and Noriko figured out, Amy Barrett and her men couldn't have arranged to smuggle out the malium without a contact— meaning someone here in Ambora with high-level access to the main computer. Which means someone in colony administration. Which basically means someone who's working for Dad."

"So one of the colony officials is a traitor," said Arkady.

"You got it," said Sean. "Now if we can figure out who the fink is before the PL gets here, the politicos who want Dad's head on a platter will have to start all over again."

"Which is where I come in?" asked Arkady, sitting on the end of the bed.

"Only if you want to," replied Sean. "But you did a pretty good job of finding out who tried to kill me. So I thought maybe you could do a little more digging. . . ."

"Arkady Davidov, boy detective," said Arkady with a tight grin.

"You don't have to do it," added Sean. He slipped the hoverchair into reverse and floated

backwards. A sensor beam caused it to stop well short of the wall. "The thing is, I still can't get around all that well myself, yet. . . ." Sean's voice trailed off, and he made a gesture of frustration.

Til be glad do it," Arkady said quietly. "But it's going to cost you."

Sean closed his eyes. "I think I know what you want."

"Nothing very difficult," replied Arkady. "The truth will do quite nicely. For starters, why don't you tell me what really happened while you were supposedly lying here in a coma."

In the brush on the east side of the Med Dome, the two theskies placed the quufers they carried on the ground. Then they stood motionless, sheltering the smaller animals with their bodies.

As time went on, more theskies joined them. Each new arrival cradled a quufer in its front claws.

The second moon rose. Theskies continued to arrive, slipping through the brush so silently human ears would have been hard put to hear them. Some of the newcomers deposited their quufers on the ground and then left the way they had come. Others remained, either setting their quufers down, or holding the smaller animals in front of their bodies, almost as if offering them in sacrifice.

Occasionally one of the quufers would utter a gentle "kwoo," the birdlike sound that had given them their name among the colonists.

The theskies, however, were silent.

CHAPTER FIVE

No Right to Remain Silent

"I got your message," said Noriko. "Mind telling me how you did it?"

She was standing at the door to Sean's hospital room. As he studied her face, her expression seemed to waver between astonishment and anger, then fear and tenderness. And as her expression shifted, so, too, did the tone of the blue light he could see within her.

"If you'll come in, I'll tell you," he offered. "At least, as much as I can figure out."

Noriko nodded to Arkady as she crossed to the bed. "You just happen by?" she asked. "Or did you get a brain bulletin requesting your presence?"

"Brain bulletin," said Arkady with a slight smile. "But now that you're here, I have a promise that all will be explained. He refused to start without you."

"Smart boy." Noriko nodded approvingly. She

climbed onto the end of the hospital bed and sat cross-legged, staring directly at Sean.

"Okay, Mystery Man," she said. "Let's hear it. This better be good, by the way. I don't like to be interrupted during my workout. But when someone sends a comm call directly into my brain, it's hard to ignore it." She smiled as she spoke, but her voice was serious. Sean could tell she was working hard to keep it from trembling.

For a moment no one spoke.

"Do we have to prompt you?" asked Noriko, slightly impatient.

Sean closed his eyes. "I'm sorry. But I really don't like this stuff. Arkady can tell you how much I fought it when we got that first call up in the mountains. I was the last to experience it, and I've always figured that was because I was trying so hard not to. I was fairly happy with reality as I had always known it."

"And now things that were real aren't anymore?" asked Arkady gently.

"Not exactly," said Sean. "It's more like the boundaries of reality have been extended. There's a line in that play Zach and Daffy are always talking about— Hamlet, I think. Zach keeps quoting it. Something about, There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your jphilosophy.' Well, my dreams have been getting pretty weird lately."

"Is it safe to guess they've had something to do with theskies?" asked Arkady.

Sean flinched. Arkady's question was a clear reference to the fact that, along with Philippa and Noriko, he had been rescued from certain death by

a theskie that spoke to them with Sean's voice. In the few times that they

had been able to speak together since then, the closest Sean had come to talking about what had happened was to ask them to pretend it hadn't.

Well, the time for pretending is over, Sean told himself. Out loud he said, "I appreciate the way you two managed to explain what happened at the malium mine and in Gandria without mentioning you heard my voice coming out of a theskie's mouth. I suppose you've really earned some kind of explanation."

"Could be," said Noriko. "But if I get an explanation, I want it to be because you want to give it. If you're doing this out of duty, I'll leave the room until you're done."

Sean smiled. "Sit still, Wilder. I do want to tell you. You, too, Arkady. If you want to help out with the other thing, I'd appreciate it. But we'll make this a freebie. Maybe we should call Pippa, too."

Arkady shook his head. "She's in isolation mode right now," he said. "I'll fill her in later."

"What about the others?" asked Noriko.

Sean sighed. "I guess they'll have to know sooner or later. But let me practice on you. This is hard enough as it is. I'm—well, I guess I'm afraid."

Arkady settled into his chair. "Take your time," he said. "You're among friends now."

Yeah, thought Sean. But if your friends think you're crazy, then what do you do?

He felt Noriko stifling her impatience as she waited for him to speak. He knew she realized it wasn't enough for her not to show it; as long as she even felt it, he would be aware of it.

This current is tricky, he thought. / came to Gauguin planning to avoid getting attached to anyone. And now somehow I end up being linked to my friends in a way that's probably tighter than any human beings have ever experienced. It's kind of nice to know you re never alone. But sometimes it feels like living in a house with no doors.

Out loud he said, "We'll have to remember to ask Zach and Clea about those blocking techniques they've been offering to teach the rest of us."

Noriko scowled, and he realized too late that it sounded like he wanted to close her out.

"I just mean because of what's been happening to me," he said hastily, and then, seeing that he was only making things worse, he hurried into his story.

"You may know parts of this. But no one knows it all. To begin with, I should have died when Amy Barrett used that steel bar to let some daylight into my skull."

He saw Noriko shiver.

"Zach told me there were times when Dr. Ya-moto thought you had died," said Arkady. "So what was going on while you were supposed to be kissing this world good-bye?"

"Actually, the inside of my head was pretty busy while 1 was lying there,"

said Sean. He hesitated again, then said, "Space, this is hard. I know you're going to think I'm crazy, but I had, well, visitors." He paused. "Inside my head."

He glanced at Noriko, but her face was empty of all emotion. Whatever she was feeling, she was

fighting hard to keep it inside. He forced himself to continue.

"Some of them looked kind of like gray bubbles. They didn't say anything, but after a while I found that by looking through them I could see what was going on in the real world." He frowned. "Real world is the wrong term. Let's say in our world."

"What were they?" asked Noriko.

Sean bit his lip. "Theskies."

Arkady nodded, as if this made some kind of sense to him.

"Thing is," continued Sean, "they really aren't very bright. Seems there's plenty of room in their heads for someone else to come in and share their brain for a while—which is one reason I was able to act through them that night. That's how the others do it, too."

"What others?" asked Arkady.

Sean looked nervous. Noriko reached forward and grabbed his foot, which she held almost as she would have held his hand had she been sitting next to him. Somehow the gesture made him feel better. She doesn't think I'm crazy yet, he told himself.

He decided to come at Arkady's question from the side instead of straight on.

"Did you know that the world is made of light?" he asked. "At least, that's one way to see it. The longer I was in the coma, the easier it got for me to see it that way, partly because I had help. Besides the gray bubbles, I kept seeing colored lights. Two kinds of colored lights, really. One variety was a solid bar of light. Those were humans. Actually, I think every living thing has some kind of light. But

the lights I could see really clearly belonged to you guys—that is, everyone who's connected by the current."

He hesitated, and decided not to tell them that he could still see the lights —that looking at No-riko, he saw both her physical body and the blue glow that sizzled inside of her.

"So we were one kind of light," said Noriko. "What was the other?"

"They were the ones running the show. They were bright and swirling. I wish you could see them; the colors are so intense. They're really beautiful. And they have a city—a city made of light—where they took me while I was sick."

He noticed Noriko glancing at Arkady. They don't believe me, he thought in a panic. He tried to check the current, but whatever they were feeling, they were working hard to keep it shielded.

Uncertainty seemed to overwhelm him. Though Sean had intended to tell

them everything, he now found he couldn't bring himself to do it.

"Anyway," he finished lamely, "I get along pretty well with theskies these days."

"Empathetic projection into an animal," stated Arkady. "It makes sense, in a weird kind of a way."

"I wonder what the odds are of getting anyone to believe this one," said Noriko.

"None, for now," answered Sean. "I don't want anyone outside our group to know about it. Tell the others, if you want. They have a right to know, since I guess it could happen to them, too. But that's as far as I want it to go just yet."

And as for the rest of the story, he thought

dejectedly, that's going to stay right here inside me. Maybe forever.

"No," responded another presence from inside his head. "You cannot remain silent. Someone must bear witness. r

Sean turned his attention to Noriko and wondered if he could stare at her hard enough to ignore the intruder inside his skull.

"Here," said Will Mornette. "You take her for a moment."

Moving so carefully an outside observer might have thought he was passing on a live bomb, Will Mornette passed a tiny, blanket-wrapped bundle on to his stepbrother, Paul Riedel.

Eyebrows raised, Paul accepted it.

Will watched the rush of emotions that flickered over his stepbrother's face as he looked down at the baby. He understood them—at least some of them—because Will felt them himself. She was beautiful. She was amazing. And she was also irreversible: Like it or not, Ginny was the thread that would tie them together for the rest of their lives. Paul was only a stepbrother, related by the laws of marriage, but not by the bond of blood. He and Will had known each other for only a short time, forced to share a room by the impending arrival of the new member of the Riedel-Mornette clan.

But they really were a clan now. Ginny was his half-sister, tied to him by blood, his father's blood which now ran in her veins—and tied just as firmly to Paul on his mother's side. Here, in that tiny bundle of life Paul held in his arms, the two families had truly merged.

"Hey, congratulations!" said a familiar voice.

Will looked up to see the friendly, lopsided smile of Zach Yamoto.

"Thank you, Zach," said Laura Riedel-Mornette.

Will couldn't help but smile when he glanced at his stepmother. She was clearly exhausted, but her face was shining with a kind of joy he had never seen before. And his father, tall and lean, his carved features revealing the strong, barely diluted elements of his Amerind background, was glowing with a pride that practically warmed the room.

"Come on in, Zach," urged Mr. Mornette.

"Just for a second," Zach said, stepping up behind Paul and peering over

his shoulder. "Can't stay long—got a date with an angel."

Paul moved the blanket so that Zach could peer down into the baby's face.

"Hey, nice work, folks!" he said happily. "Gauguin's firstborn is a real beauty."

Though he hadn't been too excited about the idea to begin with, Will had to agree. Virginia Dare Sacajawea Riedel-Mornette was a real keeper.

The staff was just switching off the lights in the upper level of the Greendomes Cafe when Clea slid into the seat opposite Zach.

He looks tired, she thought, wishing that he could go back to being the happy-go-lucky guy she had first met.

"Thanks for coming," said Zach. He ran his hands through his long brown hair in a gesture that spoke of true weariness. "Did you have any trouble getting out this late?"

"Not really/ 1 she replied. "I was all set to beg, plead, and grovel. But when I asked, Mom just said okay, as long as I was back in less than an hour. I don't think she's very happy with the way we've been treated lately."

"That's good," said Zach . "If we can get all our parents to see what a raw deal we're getting, maybe they can do something about it."

"I wouldn't count on it." Clea frowned. "Your folks and my folks would be glad to speak up. And probably Arkady's dad. But you know Sean's father. He's so dead set against showing favoritism, he'd let . . ." She hesitated, then finished lamely, "Well, I don't know what it would take to get him to speak up. And as for Pippa's parents—"

"I wasn't even thinking of them," Zach interrupted with a bitter laugh. "The best thing about the Biddings is they make me realize how lucky I am to have the parents I got."

"Same here," said Clea fervently. Suddenly she felt herself stifling a yawn. "Sorry," she said. "I'm not used to staying up this late."

"The price of offending the powers-that-be," said Zach. "The only time we can get together with our friends is a time when anyone in their right mind would be asleep. And speaking of friends—"

Clea nodded. That was why Zach had wanted to talk to her: to discuss what was going on with all of them. It would be nice if he just wanted to talk to me, she thought dreamily. She looked at him as he started to list the things he was worried about.

Poor Zach, she thought. All this has been so hard on him because he worries so much about all of us. She remembered what had happened when

Paul Riedel mentioned that some research showed that comatose people respond to the human voice. From then on Zach had made a point to spend time with Sean every day, talking to his still form, joking, laughing, trying desperately to bring his lost friend back from wherever he had disappeared to.

Zach was special—not the kind of special you couldn't ignore, like Sean with his startling good looks and natural leadership. Zach's specialness was the rarest and hardest kind to find; he was someone who day in and day out

tried to make things better around him, without ever drawing attention to himself, or even wanting people to realize it.

It was almost funny. Having once devoted himself to coming up with more ways to skate out of drudge than anyone on the planet, he had actually found something he thought was worth doing— namely, working in the Med Dome. And though he'd rather die than admit it, "The Great Skate" was now putting in more hours than any of them.

Suddenly Clea realized that Zach had stopped talking. He was staring at her with a strange expression. With a shiver, she realized that she had dropped her empathic shields. She felt her cheeks go warm. Between the current and his own natural empathic talent, there was no way Zach could have missed catching how she felt about him. Oh! she thought. He's never shown any real interest. Now maybe he's going to be afraid to be my friend.

At the thought of losing the closeness that had been growing between them, Clea felt a lump

wedge itself in her throat. But before she could say anything, she felt a current-carried wave of fear and anger washing over her.

From Zach? she thought for one terrible instant. But from the look on Zach's face, he had felt it, too, and she realized that the power of the emotions flooding through her had disoriented her. Of course it wasn't from Zach.

"Did you feel that?" he asked, his voice low and husky.

She nodded. "Family explosion—megaton variety. Let's go outside. I have a feeling we'll be seeing Philippa pretty soon. And she's going to need us."

"Pappy Zach's shoulder is always ready to dry the tears of a beautiful woman," he said, pushing himself to his feet.

And even though she knew very well that Zach almost never said anything serious unless he was forced to, Clea decided that this must mean that he was interested in her best friend.

It was certainly easier than believing that he was interested in her.

Although he tried to look casual as he leaned against the rail of the little bridge, Zach's insides were in a turmoil.

Was I reading her right? he thought desperately, trying to look at Clea without facing her, trying to read her feelings without leaving himself so wide open that she could read his longing. It was a terrifying thought. Because if she could read his feelings, then she would have to react. What if she outright rejected him? No, she wasn't that way.

But she might actually feel sorry for him. The thought seemed to add another half-twist to his stomach.

If only Pippa hadn't interrupted with the burst of anger. And if only she'd get here, so he wouldn't have to stand so close to Clea, wondering just what it was he had been reading from her for that instant back in the Greendomes Cafe.

And then Philippa was there, her creamy skin and milk-white hair making her look almost like a ghost as she stepped out of the darkness onto the bridge.

"Sorry for the interruption," she said. "I didn't mean to let things get out of hand like that."

Zach shrugged. "It's not like you do it very often," he said. Which was a polite way of saying she was the most emotionally controlled person he had ever met.

"We figured you might want to talk," said Clea softly.

Philippa nodded. "I knew you were waiting for me," she said. "I could sense you here. I thought about going the other way, but I figured you might stand here all night, being good citizens." She closed her eyes. "Sorry, I didn't mean that the way it sounded. I'm just not coping very well."

"Tough night on the home front?" asked Zach softly.

She nodded. "They were on me about Miguel again."

Zach could feel the flare of anger that came from beside him. "What's wrong with them?" asked Clea, her voice far more fierce than he was used to. "Don't they understand anything?"

Philippa shrugged. "Death before dishonor is

my parent's theory, at least when it comes to me. The fact that Miguel died saving Arkady and me isn't nearly as important as the fact that I knew he was on Gauguin and didn't turn him in. They'd like it if I did penance for the rest of my life."

She leaned over the railing, staring down into the dark waters of the Tati. For a moment the only sounds were that of the bubbling water and the distant boom of the Kartai Sea's glowing waves as they crashed against the black sands of Sanjo Bay.

"Need a place to stay?" asked Clea quietly.

Philippa shrugged. "It might be nice," she finally replied, her voice guarded.

Well, never let it be said a Yamoto doesn't know his exit cue when he hears it, thought Zach. Lifting himself away from the rail, he bid Clea and Philippa goodnight and disappeared into the darkness.

Justine and Juliette rode high in the dark sky over Ambora. Their waning crescents shed a pale mauve light that was almost lost in the brilliance of the stars.

Outside the Med Dome theskies sat, stood, or crouched without moving, waiting until the time was right.

The glowglobes lighting the city's streets were dimmed to late-night levels. The main passageways, which glowed from underneath, cast only enough light for late night wanderers to see where their feet were falling.

But there were no wanderers. Save for the few souls on midnight duty, the small city was sleeping. And even those on duty sometimes nodded.

Which is why no one noticed when the theskies

ran silently from the brush and into the Med Dome—or when they raced back out, carrying their prize.

Stopping only to scoop up the waiting quufers, the theskies vanished into

the darkness.

CHAPTER SIX

Morning Disaster

"Is that you, Daphneria?" asked a voice that sounded something like two stones grating together.

"Indeed it is, Daddy dear," called Daphne. "You can go back to sleep. I've got an early date."

This announcement was greeted with a series of scratchy snorts, the words, "You tell young Willi-cus—", and a few sputters which quickly resolved into a deep, resounding snore.

Smiling, Daphne slipped out of the DeVries family dome. She wasn't surprised her father was so sleepy. It was still quite early. The world was washed in tones of gray, and Gauguin's blue sun was just beginning to show on the horizon. A theskie lounging in the bushes near the dome looked at her, blinked, and croaked, "Rock-a-bye, rock-a-bye, ack ack ack."

Daphne paused. "You guys give me the creeps," she said. "Sometimes, I wonder if you can read my mind."

"Mind you creep, creep not into my mind," cried the theskie, stretching out its neck for her to scratch under its chin.

Tm ignoring you," said Daphne, settling her wide-brimmed, white hat more firmly onto her head. The early morning breeze played through the ends of her hip-length magenta hair, causing it to fan out behind her.

Despite Daphne's rejection, the theskie fell into step beside her. Walking together, the girl and the feathery-scaled creature crossed the Tati and approached the large half-bubble of the Ed Dome. Daphne smiled when she saw that Will had already arrived. He was sitting on a piece of free-form silanna created by one of the art classes, a curving, swooping shape that doubled as a sculpture and a multi-level bench. He was grinning broadly.

"Well, which is it?" she cried, running up to join him. "A boy or a girl?"

"A girl," said Will. "Virginia Dare Sacajawea Riedel-Mornette."

Daphne looked at him in shock. "Virginia Dare Sacajawea Riedel-Mornette?" she asked. "Your parents really put all that name on one little baby?"

"It's their kid," said Will with a shrug.

"Oh, and big brother Will doesn't care at all, does he?" Daphne patted his hand.

Will grinned shyly. "Well, she is kind of cute," he admitted.

"Uh-oh." Daphne sighed. "Looks like I've got a

rival for your affections. Better tell me all about her."

"Maybe you'd better sit down," said Will, gesturing to a spot next to him on the bench-sculpture. "This could take a while." Look at him glow, thought

Daphne as she settled down, This is one of the best things that's ever happened to him. And happily, patiently, she waited for him to finish before she hit him with her plan for The Party.

The sky was still early-morning gray when Clea followed Philippa out of the Tourni family dome.

"I'm sorry," said Philippa, after they had walked a short way in silence. "I appreciate you all letting me stay here for the night, and the morning, but it was just so . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"No problem," said Clea lightly. "I can sit with them any morning."

Or was that the wrong thing to say? she wondered uncomfortably. After all, that easy family togetherness, so natural and comfortable for the Tournis and so alien to Philippa, was precisely what had driven the girl away from the table. Between the current and her own highly developed empathic ability, Clea knew that what bothered Philippa was not the closeness of the Tourni family, squabbles and all. What bothered her was the comparison to her own family, a family which was formal to the point of stiffness, even when everyone was in a good mood—which wasn't often.

"Look, there are Will and Daffy," Clea said brightly as they approached the Bradbury School

dome. "Come on, let's hurry. I never did get to ask Zach about the baby last night."

"Sorry," said Philippa again. "I seem to disrupt everyone's schedule these days."

"Oh, shut up," said Clea cheerfully. Then she stopped. Not good enough, she thought. That would work with Zach. He knows how to laugh himself out of a funk. But not Philippa.

"Stop right there," Clea demanded. Philippa was a few paces ahead of her. She stopped and turned, clearly surprised by the commanding tone in Clea's usually mild voice.

"Now listen to me, Philippa Bidding," she declared, trying to sound calmer than she felt. She took a step forward. "I don't mind helping you out. In fact I like it. What I hate is having to fight to do it. What does it take to get it through that bright and beautiful skull of yours that I care about you? We all care about you." She took another step closer. Might as well say it, she thought. "Look, stupid—we love you."

To her very great astonishment, Philippa—who had come through heartstopping adventures, family rejection, and the death of Miguel Arcaro without shedding a tear—began to sob uncontrollably.

"Why didn't Sean say anything to me," Zach wondered aloud.

Arkady could read his friend's unhappiness as clearly as if it were painted across his forehead. "Two reasons," he said. "For one thing, you were about to start your shift. I was just ending mine, so I was more available."

"And the second?" asked Zach.

Arkady shrugged his muscular shoulders. "It's just the way Sean thinks.

You know, you described it to Clea: 'that filing system he calls a brain.' Since I did all that poking around after his accident, I'm the one he keeps in the box called 'detective.' It's not the same as the box called 'best friend,' you know."

Zach snorted and quickly changed the subject. "Look," he said, "There's the gang—or at least most of it. Let's see what's going on."

Daphne's voice rang out as if in answer. "Come one and all," she cried, "for I have a perfectly wonderful idea!"

"Now listen," she said once Zach and Arkady had joined them and offered their congratulations to the new big brother. "Things have been getting pretty grim around here lately. And when that happens, there's only one thing to do."

"Have a party!" cried Zach instantly.

"I love a man who knows his cue," said Daphne. "But not just any old party. First, we need a reason to celebrate. But that's easy. We're going to celebrate the fact that we're all still alive after what's been going on. Sean has escaped the tomb. Ginny is out of the womb. And that's what this party is going to be: The Festival of New Beginnings!"

"What a nice name," said Clea softly.

"Mce?" cried Daphne. "It's not just nice It's brilliant!" She was warming to her speech now, bringing all her theatrical flair to bear on the delivery. "You see, we're going to tie this party into time and tide, which may wait for no man, but are certainly doing something at the right time for us."

She paused for a minute, realizing that the last sentence had gotten a little jumbled.

"Just tell the story," suggested Will.

Daphne shot him a half-frown, but went on with her speech. "I got the idea from Paul," she continued. "You see, only a few days from now we're going to have the first conjunction of new moons since people have been living on Gauguin. What does that mean? Fm glad you asked. It means two things: No moon in the sky—no Justine, no Juliette—which means, clouds cooperating, the starriest night we'll ever see. The starriest night—and the lowest tide. And as far as Fm concerned, that means it's time to go to the beach and dance our brains out!"

"I like the way she thinks," said Zach.

"So do I," said a friendly, familiar voice behind them. "You kids could use a party. That is, assuming you can have a party without turning it into some kind of adventure."

The gang greeted the arrival Marc Oblitt with genuine pleasure. The stocky history instructor, who was also coach of the transition level's freeball team, was the most popular teacher in the school.

"No problem, Mr. Oblitt," said Zach. "Good times are my specialty. I'll make them have fun whether they like it or not."

Marc Oblitt nodded seriously. "I knew I could count on you, Zach. Now tell me about this new arrival," he said, turning his attention to Will.

Will was only too happy to oblige him with praise of Virginia Dare

Sacajawea Riedel-Mornette.

"Good name," said Mr. Oblitt, nodding in approval.

"You're kidding," squeaked Daphne.

"Not at all, my dear Ms. DeVries. Think of it. Virginia Dare was the first child born to the European settlers in North America—which at the time they called 'The New World.' Wonderful name for the first child born on this new world. But to acknowledge those Amerind bloodlines from Will's side of the family, what better name than that of the great woman who guided Lewis and Clark across the continent? Virginia Dare Sacajawea Riedel-Mornette." Mr. Oblitt rolled the name off his tongue as if he was savoring every syllable. "A name filled with history and meaning. A very good name indeed."

"You had best save your history lessons for the classroom, Mr. Oblitt," a sharp voice cut in.

Zach turned and was displeased to see the pinched face of Ivan Santori.

"As for the rest of you." Mr. Santori went on, "I don't want you loitering on the steps. If the building is open, go in and get to your appropriate places. If it's not, wait somewhere else. And Ms. Wilder, stop by my office this morning. I've got a change in your Community Service schedule." He began to walk away, then stopped and turned back to Mr. Oblitt. "Oblitt, I want to see you immediately."

Mr. Oblitt was quiet for a moment. Zach saw him take a deep breath, then turn and look Santori straight in the eye. Speaking slowly, calmly, he said, "I'll be with you in a few minutes, Mr. Santori. However, right now I'm having a conversation with

some friends. My official day starts in twelve minutes. I will be in your office at that time."

For a moment, neither man moved. The two men glared at each other. Zach had the feeling that if he had a knife, he could have cut the air, so thick was it with angry vibrations.

Til be waiting," retorted Santori abruptly. Then he turned on his heel and walked away.

Ouch! thought Zach. It was a nice scene, but I bet its going to cost Marc plenty. He noticed that the dark-haired teacher's hands were shaking.

"Well, that was a lovely way to start the morning," said Mr. Oblitt. He paused, then added, "I could probably get fired for saying this, but I guess someone has to do it. You guys have really managed to get on his bad side, but you don't have to let him bully you. I've been watching him lately, and I don't like the way he treats you. I've been meaning to mention it to Dr. Ives, who really is one of the good guys, believe it or not. Only, as a member of the governor's cabinet he's been so wrapped up in all the fallout from what happened last week that I haven't been able to see him. If you think it's getting out of hand, tell me. I'll do what I can, though I can't promise anything." Then, as if he knew he had said too much, he shrugged and walked away from the group.

"Why can't all the teachers be like him?" asked Daphne mournfully.

Zach shrugged. "What I want to know is why anyone has to be as nasty as Santori.

Conversation was just returning to the plans for the big party when Mr. Oblitt reappeared, his face

strained and anxious. "Will," he said. "I need to see you."

Glancing uneasily at the others, Will followed the teacher into the Ed Dome. Seconds later, a tall form burst through the door and raced off down the path that led from the school to the Med Dome.

Those that remained exchanged glances. They had all felt the current-borne burst of anger and fear that had erupted from Will only seconds after he had followed Mr. Oblitt into the building.

Turning now, they saw Mr. Oblitt on the steps.

"What the hell is going on?" asked Zach.

Marc Oblitt's face was as grim as any of the kids had ever seen it. "Will's sister is missing," he said. "We think she's been kidnapped."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Theskies!

Paul Riedel was waiting at the entrance to the Med Dome when his stepbrother Will Mornette came racing up. The brief run had winded the tall boy, who had not yet completely adjusted to a gravity several times more powerful than that of the world where he'd been raised.

Will sagged against the wall and took a couple of shuddering breaths. "What's going on?" he demanded.

Paul's face was white, his expression grim. "I don't know—about Ginny, I mean. Mom is in hysterics, and your father is so mad I'm scared to be in the same room with him." Paul shuddered. "He looks like he's ready to kill someone."

"Do you blame him?" asked Will.

Paul shook his head. "I feel the same way," he muttered.

Will nodded. "Me, too. But you still didn't answer me. What's going on?"

"No one knows. When the nurse came in to check on the baby this morning she was gone. That's it. That's all anyone knows."

"But it doesn't make any sense," Will objected. A sudden thought struck him. "Unless it's some of Barrett's gang out for revenge." He was referring to the corrupt group of malium miners, headed by Amy Barrett, who had tried to kill Sean and some of the others when the kids had discovered their illegal actions.

"I suppose that's possible," agreed Paul. "But— if that's the case, why didn't they leave a note or something?"

"I don't know. None of this—"

Will was interrupted by Mr. Mornette exploding out of the building. Another man, someone Will recognized as a colony official, was tagging after him, babbling something about being reasonable. Mr. Mornette turned on him savagely. "You got a kid, buddy? Imagine your kid missing. Then we'll talk about reasonable. You find my baby. Until then, don't get near me!"

The man backed away. Before he could say another word, Mr. Mornette had grabbed Will by the arm. "Come on," he said. "It's time you started using what I taught you back on Acedium."

Will nodded. When he was younger his father had spent countless hours teaching him skills still practiced on the tribal lands that now existed on the remains of what had been the state of California. Mr. Mornette always said it was part of keeping their heritage alive, though Will suspected it

was partly because his father felt guilty about having left the tribal lands. But he'd never expected to actually use those tracking skills, and certainly not in a situation like this.

While Paul looked on helplessly, the Mornettes began weaving back and forth in front of the Med Dome. Will must have had a disturbing idea, because his expression changed and Paul saw him glance at his father. Mr. Mornette was kneeling on the ground just a few meters away, examining a low-growing bush. His face was troubled, too.

He craned his neck to see what it was, but he couldn't tell from where he stood. Paul watched Will pluck something from a leaf and cross to his father. Will hesitated for a moment, then held out his hand. Paul heard him ask, "Are you thinking the same thing I'm thinking?"

Mr. Mornette looked at what his son was holding. Then he nodded. The look of terror on his stepfather's face struck Paul like a blow to the stomach.

"Dad," he heard Will say softly, "I don't think they'll hurt her."

Sean Matthews stood at the door to his room in the Med Dome. "What's all the excitement?" he asked a nearby nurse. "They having a party because I'm going home today?"

The nurse smiled. It was no secret that Sean had been a lousy patient, always pushing the limits, trying to do more and move faster than his doctors wanted. But the nurse's smile was a faint one, forced, and it disappeared quickly.

Sean had spent too much of his life in the company of government officials not to know that look.

"What is going on?" he asked more seriously now. "Emergency of some kind?"

"The baby is missing," said the nurse. She sounded close to tears.

Sean looked at her in astonishment. He could easily understand her emotional reaction. He had wandered down to see the Riedel-Mornette baby himself last night. Little Ginny was as cute as they come, and most of the hospital staff was already nuts about her.

But it wasn't only that, Sean knew that as the first human baby born on the planet, Virginia Dare Sacajawea Riedel-Mornette came complete with a heavy symbolic load. She represented the future of the human race on Gauguin, proof that humankind was here to stay, to tame this rough and beautiful world.

If something happened to this baby it would be a bad omen. And if nothing else, life on five worlds had taught Sean that not even the most progressive, scientific advances, including the conquest of space through the discovery of the faster-than-light technology, had been able to separate human beings from their superstitions. His father said it was something rooted so deep in human beginnings that it would never be driven out. For his own part, Sean believed you should never say never. But he knew what his father said was true for the time being at least. Much as they hated to admit it, most people, even trained scientists, were superstitious. Psychologically speaking, the loss of this child was the worst thing that could

possibly happen, not only to Will and his family, but to the colony at large. A sense of ill luck would hang over the settlers for years to come.

Sean stepped back into his room feeling pity for Will and his family and a rising sense of fury at his own helplessness. The feeling lasted no more than a few seconds. He could do something, if only he were willing.

If only. How stupid. He might not like the idea, but he could scarcely refuse to do anything that might help find the baby. Lying back on his bed, he closed his eyes and invited the lights to come.

They arrived quickly, almost instantly, as if they had been waiting for him.

But what he discovered when they arrived made him wish that he had remained standing out in the hallway with his eyes wide open.

"Theskies?" cried Daphne in astonishment as she stared at Will's image on the vidphone. "Your sister was kidnapped by theskiesT

Will nodded grimly. "I have no idea why. But there's no question that's what happened. Guard types are scanning the Med Dome's security tapes right now. I imagine we'll have official confirmation pretty soon. But Dad and I don't need tapes for confirmation. Their tracks were as clear as a morning in the dry season. We found tell tale theskie scales all around the Med Dome—lots more than usual—along with one of Ginny's little toys. It has to be them."

"What now?" asked Daphne.

Will turned away from the vidphone and glanced over his shoulder. "We find her," he said.

"We're leaving in a few minutes. Dad just wanted to pick up some gear. He's almost finished. We'll head back to the Med Dome, pick up their trail, and take it from there."

"Aren't you going to wait for Security to help you?"

Will snorted. "They haven't done much so far. They're monitoring the tapes mostly to convince us that it wasn't the theskies who took her."

Daphne hesitated. "Are you taking guns?"

Will nodded.

"Be careful," she whispered.

He nodded again, then closed the connection. "Will!" shouted a voice behind him. "Let's get moving!"

He followed his father out the door. Jumping into the family's hovercar, they headed back to the Med Dome.

Daphne hung up the vidphone and took a deep breath. Now what? Was there anything she could do? Not really. She couldn't even go and comfort the baby's mother, since the doctors had given Mrs. Riedel-Mornette a heavy sedative to lessen the shock of Ginny's kidnapping.

"Some sort of problem, Ms. DeVries?" asked a familiar and most unwelcome voice.

Daphne sighed Santori was bound to jug her for being out here in the hall when she was supposed to be in class. She didn't really care about the extra time on drudge; she just didn't want to have to deal with the man.

"I was just checking in with Will," she said cau-

tiously, deciding that the vice principal was not worth the effort of an elaborate excuse.

Santori narrowed his eyes and made a little sound to indicate his disgust. "Skipping class for personal reasons is not smiled upon here at Bradbury School," he said. Til need to see you in my office, Ms. DeVries."

Daphne followed Santori to the Administrative Offices, reflecting that if the Old Earth science fiction writer Bradbury School had been named for had any idea how the place was being run, he'd be spinning in his grave.

Zach was in class, trying desperately to pay attention to what Marc Oblitt was saying about the Rock Wars of the early twenty-first century when a message from Sean arrowed into his head. "Get the gang and get over here. I know where the baby isT

Zach sat up straight in his seat, thinking at first that he had imagined it. He formed a wordless question in his mind, and immediately Sean responded, 'Wo, you re not imagining things. And skip the idea of coming over here. It's a waste of time. Vm still not used to the idea that I can talk to you — reliably and consistently — without being face to face. "

Zach nodded, which he realized was relatively silly, since there was no way Sean could possibly see it. He glanced up at Mr. Oblitt. The teacher was facing the wall, making a series of notes with his light pen.

"Look, I don't have a communication set in my head like you do/ 9 thought Zach. He knew he couldn't send the others the kind of message he

was receiving from Sean; it was Sean's strength that was making this kind of link possible. "Can you contact the others? Tell them to slip out of the dome when this period ends. Santori will have our collective hide if he catches us, so we'd better try to sneak out. Have them meet me at the third bridge. No one's likely to spot us up there at this time of day."

Sean sent back an affirmative. His presence disappeared from Zach's brain.

Zach sat and stared at the wall where Mr. Oblitt was making notes. The words didn't seem to have any meaning, and it was impossible to concentrate on what the man was saying.

It was all he could do to sit still. He wanted to get up and leave, yet drawing attention to himself like that would mess up everything. But what if the baby were in real danger? No, he decided, she must be safe, at least for the time being. Otherwise Sean would have sent a different, more frantic message.

And then, miraculously, class was over. Slipping on his best "I'm on an important errand, so leave me alone" expression, Zach left the room, and then the building, heading for the third bridge over the Tati.

Daphne was the last to arrive. Her magenta hair flew out behind her as she ran up to join the others.

"I was in Santori's office when I got Sean's message," she gasped. "He was jugging me for skipping class to call Will. I can't wait to see what he'll do to me for this one!"

Zach nodded. "We're all going to catch hell for this, though if we bring back the baby they might look at things differently."

"People are going to be looking at everything differently around here," said Daphne. "Did Sean tell you what happened?"

Zach and the others looked blank.

Daphne didn't bother to pause for effect; the news was too big, the situation too urgent. "Ginny was kidnapped by theskies!"

"You can't be serious!" cried Clea.

"She is," said Sean, in a voice that spoke to all six teens at once. "Will and his father have figured it out, and they're on the way to try to rescue her You have to get there first, or it could be a disaster I can't get through to Will — he's so upset that he's blocking all my messages. But something important is going on, and it can't be interrupted"

CHAPTER EIGHT

On the Trail

Zach reached out and took Clea's hand. It felt small and warm. He gave it the slightest squeeze, but she didn't squeeze back. He wondered if that was because she didn't want to encourage him, or because she was so intent on what they were doing.

Empty your skull bone brain, he told himself fiercely, unless you want everyone in the group to know what you're thinking.

He tried to concentrate on the baby.

"Thank you" said Sean when the six of them had finished joining hands. "It's a whole lot easier for me to contact you when you're linked like that. Makes the connection a lot stronger. "

Why? thought Arkady. Zach was a little surprised to realize that he could "hear" Arkady's thought as clearly as Sean's. The current really was getting stronger.

"We can talk about how and why later" said Sean. "Right now you've got to find Ginny and keep Will and Mr. Mornette away from her."

"Haven't you got that kind of backward?" thought Daphne. Zach sensed a flash of anger in the thought.

"No, I haven't! There's something happening, something important If it's interrupted, it could be very dangerous for the baby."

"What is it?" asked Clea.

"A kind of initiation. I'll explain later. Right now you've got to get moving. Can any of you get hold of a hovercar?"

Zach hesitated. "I probably can," he said/ thought after a moment. "But if anything happens to it, there's going to be hell to pay How many vehicles have we gone through in the last —"

Sean's thought/response was swift and fierce: "Zach, this is a matter of life and death /"

Zach felt like he'd been slapped. "I'll get the car," he thought.

"Good. Get some rope and some climbing equipment, too. As soon as you're ready to roll, join hands and 'tune in' again. I've got to take a rest. This is hard work, and we've still got a lot to do."

And with that he was gone. Zach opened his eyes— When did I close them? he wondered—and looked at the others.

"Well," he said, "let's get busy."

"I'm going out on a limb for you on this one, Zach-o," said Dr. Jacinta Yamoto as she handed Zach the keys to the family hovercar.

Zach nodded. "I know that, Mom. I'll explain the whole thing to you as soon as I can." At least, he added to himself, as much as I can figure out

myself.

Til also see what I can do to cover for you with Mr. Santori," she continued.

Zach grinned. "If you can keep me out of his clutches, you get the nomination for best mother in the galaxy."

Dr. Yamoto nodded, then played the rest of her hand. "Zach, does this have anything to do with the Mornette baby?"

Zach could feel his cheeks go warm. He nodded.

"Can I help?"

"Help.*" he echoed, trying to contact Sean.

The answer came almost instantly. "Invite her along. It won't hurt to have a doctor on hand"

Zach smiled at his mother. "Wanna go for a ride?"

Dr. Yamoto smiled back. "I thought you'd never ask."

As they left the Med Dome, Zach realized that his mother's willingness to accompany them was truly a lucky break. As a high-ranking colony official, she could fend off almost anyone who might question why six teenagers were heading out of town in a hovercar in the middle of the morning.

"Thanks, Mom," he said softly as they settled into the hovercar.

Jacinta Yamoto snorted. "You don't have to thank me," she said. "This is pure curiosity. I'm dying to know what you kids have been up to for the last several months."

"Don't slink like that!" hissed Daphne as she and Clea approached the Rec Dome. "If you want to get away with something, act like you're not trying to get away with anything at all. Right now you look so guilty someone is bound to stop us to see what's going on."

"You should have brought one of the others," said Clea, feeling even guiltier for looking guilty.

"We went through all that," said Daphne. Throwing back her head, she ran her fingers through her long hair as if she was actually trying to attract attention. "Noriko and Pippa are far too notorious at the moment. People are watching every move they make. Arkady would have been all right, except for the fact that he's a boy, and the plain truth is that girls can get away with more than boys can. That left you. You should be perfect, since you've got the best reputation in the group. The only problem is, you act guiltier than anyone in the bunch!"

"Well, I'm sorry!" said Clea sharply,

"That's good!" exclaimed Daphne as they entered the dome. "When you're mad at least you don't look like you're trying to hide."

Clea was trying to figure out how to respond to that statement when Jannie Tereriff spotted them. Before the Assistant Director of Recreation could question why they were in the Rec Dome instead of at school, Daphne walked up to her and said, "Hi, Jannie! Have you seen my dad around?"

Jannie pushed a button on her electronic clipboard. "He should be in the

entertainment library," she said, consulting the chart she had pulled up.

"Thanks! Come on, Clea."

"But we don't want to see your father," whispered Clea as they headed in the direction of the library.

"I didn't say we did," Daphne replied matter-of-factly. "Actually, we're going to try very hard to avoid him, which is easier to do if we know where he is. If Jannie wants to assume I was looking for him, that's her problem."

"I bow to your superior wisdom," said Clea, thinking that Daphne's ability at misdirection was useful, but not a skill that she'd be comfortable having herself.

A few moments later the two girls were heading back out of the Rec Dome, laden with ropes, gloves, pitons, and other climbing equipment they had signed out of the expedition lockers. To Clea's relief, Zach was waiting outside with his family's hovercar, but she was surprised to see his mother sitting in the car with him.

"Good morning, Clea, Daphne," said Dr. Yamoto with a nod as the two girls stepped into the vehicle. "Nice day for an adventure, isn't it?"

Daphne looked nervous.

"Don't worry," Zach assured them, sounding cheerful. "Mom's on our side. Come on, let's get the others."

They picked up Arkady, Noriko, and Philippa on the north side of town. Once the six were reunited, it was time to make contact with Sean again.

The teens looked at each other nervously. Zach swallowed, then said, "Look, Mom, this may seem a little strange. But believe me, it works."

Jacinta Yamoto merely nodded and watched

intently as her son and his friends joined hands and closed their eyes. Sean was in contact with them almost instantly.

"Good," he said. "We're right on schedule, Zach, you're going to have to be on your toes; I'm going to take you cross country. It may be a little rough on the car —"

"Oh, great" thought Zach.

"— but it's the only way to be sure you get there on time," continued Sean, ignoring the interruption. "Noriko, Pippa, and Arkady-if the three of you sit together and stay linked, it will give me a fairly strong contact point. I'll send you the images, and you can pass them on to Zach as he drives."

The three teens signaled their willingness to act as receivers.

"All right, let's go," thought Sean.

"Well," said Dr. Yamoto as they piled back into the car, "I'd ask what that was all about. But since I've been promised a full report when this is all over, I suppose I can wait a bit."

"Let's just call it a little high-level empathy," said Zach as he started the hovercar forward. From the image Sean had sent him just before they broke the circle, he knew they would begin by traveling northeast along the Tati. But less than half a kilometer after they passed the Greendomes, Philippa,

Arkady, and Noriko all said in unison, "Make a left!"

Dr. Yamoto stifled a small yelp as Zach swung the hovercar off the road and they began floating over some low-growing vegetation. They had not gone more than twenty meters when a pair of

theskies appeared from behind some bushes and began running alongside the vehicle.

"Ackle!" they cried in what seemed to be a desperate tone. "Rock-a-bye, rock-a-bye, ack, ack ack!"

"What is that all about?" demanded Dr. Yamoto.

"I don't know for sure," replied Zach. He hesitated, then added, "But we do know that theskies have the baby."

From the corner of his eye he could see his mother's expression tighten.

Noriko was pleasantly aware of Sean's presence in her head as they traveled over the fragrant mead-owland. Several more theskies had joined them, running swiftly and silently alongside the hovercar.

"Reminds me of that time we went looking for the hunter's camp," said Daphne.

Zach nodded. "Though that time they were actually trying to herd us. I think now they're just watching."

Noriko tuned out the conversation as another message from Sean arrived. He was sending them images this time, rather than words—pictures of where he wanted Zach to steer the hovercar. She knew Arkady and Philippa were getting the same visuals, but they had decided she should speak for all of them to avoid confusion.

"Head between those two trees," she said to Zach.

The hovercar shifted on its pad of air as Zach changed course to follow her directions. More

theskies joined them. A few moments later they came to a wall of forest that was impenetrable.

"This is it," announced Noriko. "According to our fearless leader, we have to get out and walk the rest of the way."

Daphne looked at the dozens of theskies surrounding the hovercar. "Are you sure it's safe?" she asked.

"No," said Noriko, "I'm not sure at all. But Sean seems to think it is."

"Either that, or he figures we have no choice," added Zach as he switched off the hovercraft "Remember, he's very big on duty."

The car settled to the ground with a sound like a sigh, and the six teens and Dr. Yamoto climbed out. After gathering the climbing gear, they headed into the woods, theskies crowding around them like eager children.

"Sean's done giving directions for the time being," said Noriko. "He says he's exhausted, and that the theskies will show us the way from here on.

"I don't understand," said Jacinta Yamoto. "If the theskies took the baby, then why are they leading us to her? Are you certain this isn't some kind of

trap?"

"There's nothing certain in this world, Mom," said Zach, raising one eyebrow comically. "But so far the theskies have pretty much been on our side."

Dr. Yamoto nodded. From the look on the woman's face, Noriko guessed she was remembering the medical reports that had been filed on what was left of malium miners who tried to kill

Arkady and Philippa in the hills above Gandria. It was the only known incident of theskies behaving violently toward humans. Even though the creatures had been protecting other humans, the ferocity of their attack—and the feeding frenzy that followed—had left people feeling uneasy about the usually friendly creatures.

"Well, I can see why we brought the climbing gear," said Clea, interrupting Noriko's grisly thoughts. Looking ahead, Noriko realized that they had come to the edge of a gorge. When she walked a little farther, she could see they stood at the edge of a sheer drop at least a hundred meters long.

"I suppose we're going to go down there," said Dr. Yamoto. Her voice sounded weak. "Is this the kind of thing you kids have been doing all along?"

"More or less," Zach answered cheerfully. "Ain't life on a rough planet wonderful? You want to come—or would you rather stay up here?"

Dr. Yamoto straightened her shoulders a little and raised one eyebrow at her son. "Are you insinuating I might not be up to this, young man?"

"The thought never crossed my mind," protested her son.

"Actually, someone should stay up here, if we're going to bring the baby back this way," said Arkady. "I'd feel a lot better bringing her up in a sling than having one of us carry her."

"Let's get some advice from the mastermind," said Zach. "For all we know, he's got this all planned out." He extended his hands, and the others joined him in a circle.

"No master plan" said Sean, "except to make

sure we get to the baby before Will and his father do"

"Why?" asked Daphne, and the intensity of her question made the others flinch; it was, as Clea said later, like an unexpected flash of headache.

Sean's puzzlement was even more distressing. "I'm not exactly sure" he said. Zach sensed there was something Sean wasn't telling them, though he couldn't imagine what.

"Anyway" continued Sean, 7 brought you by this route because it's faster than the trail Will and his father are following. You've made up a lot of time and should be able to get down there ahead of them. They'll be coming along the base of the gorge. You don't need to worry about coming back up. You can get the hovercar down there, though it will require backtracking about five kilometers and then starting a new route. "

7 suppose I'll have to do that," signaled Zach, "since I'm responsible for the car."

"All right. Let me give you directions now, while we still have the group link. If you get lost, try to tune me in. I'm going to rest a bit."

When the directions were complete the group signaled their assent and dropped their hands.

"Come on, Mom," called Zach. "You're off the hook; we're going to take the hovercar and go the scenic route."

"Bite your tongue, young man," Jacinta Yamoto responded. She had donned a pair of climbing gloves while the teens were communicating with Sean. "I'm going down that cliff."

Zach sighed and climbed into the hovercar. It's amazing, he thought. Someone smacks Sean in the

head with an iron bar and lands him in the hospital, and he still runs the show. And I'm still the hero's buddy, getting stuck with all the lousy jobs.

"Ackle!" said a theskie standing at the edge of the car.

"Oh, ackle yourself," said Zach, throwing on the power and waiting for the pressor beam to lift the car above the surrounding brush. "Ackle, ackle, ackle."

In Ambora's Med Dome, the duty officer put down her clipboard and went to tell Sean Matthews that there had been a slight delay in the plans to release him because the colony was on emergency status due to the kidnapping.

She paused outside his door and knocked.

No answer.

"Sean?" she called

Still no answer.

"Sean, I'm coming in!" she called out. Pressing the door open, she cried out in surprise when she stepped into the room and found Sean unconscious on his bed. Stepping quickly to his side she checked his life signs, then pushed a button near the top of his bed to summon emergency assistance.

CHAPTER NINE

Cavern of the Quufers

Philippa Bidding stood at the edge of the cliff and watched Dr. Jacinta Yamoto rappel her way down the sheer face of black and red rock.

"Zach's folks are wild," she remarked to Daphne, who was the only one besides herself still standing at the top of the gorge. The Alphorion-ite's voice held a mixture of amusement and jealousy. Philippa could easily imagine her own mother's reaction to this situation; rather than bouncing down the cliff, the prim and proper Joan Bidding would be standing at the top, radiating disapproval so strongly it would fill the gorge with guilt.

"Whew!" said Daphne when Dr. Yamoto reached the base of the cliff. "She looked like she knew what she was doing, but I feel better now that she's down in one piece. Who's next—you or me?"

"The honor is yours," said Philippa.

Daphne nodded. Taking the rope in both hands, she scrambled over the edge. She hoped the others wouldn't see how nervous she was as she made her way down the face of the cliff.

Vm glad Clea reminded me to get gloves, she thought as she began to feel the heat of the rope through the padding on her palms. She knew that without the protection of the gloves she would have serious friction burns by the time she reached bottom. Glancing over her shoulder, she could see the others staring up at her from the base of the cliff. She swallowed, pushed herself away from the rocks again, and slid down another two meters.

Moments later she felt Arkady's strong hands reach out to steady her as she neared the ground. Close by she heard Dr. Yamoto saying, "I haven't done anything like that in years. I'm glad Zach wasn't here to see me make a fool of myself."

"You were wonderful," said Clea.

Daphne, who now stood next to them, nodded in agreement. "Zach would've been proud of you," she said, trying to still the trembling in her arms.

"Now what?" asked Dr. Yamoto when Philippa was finally standing beside them.

"We check in with home base," replied Noriko. She held out her hands; Clea, Philippa, Daphne, and Arkady took them without comment as Dr. Yamoto looked on. Sean did not respond immediately, and his silence made them nervous. Their sense of concern quickly became a ripple of panic circling through the group.

"Wait!"cried Noriko sharply, pulling her hands away from Arkady and

Clea. "Stop!"

The others dropped their hands and looked at her.

"Why did you do that?" asked Clea.

"Didn't you feel it?" Noriko asked. "We had some kind of feedback going on. Your nervousness was making me more nervous—which was making you more nervous. And so on. It was stronger and stronger. Space alone knows what would have happened inside our heads if we let it keep growing."

"Instant psychotic breakdown," said Daphne with a shudder. "This circle bit is powerful; we're going to have to be careful."

"Okay," said Arkady, "let's do two things. First, everyone calm down. Second, let's decrease the loop. Pippa, Noriko, and I did fine on the way here. Let's try it that way." He took a deep breath and held out his hands. Then spoke quietly. "Wait until you're ready."

After a moment, Philippa first, and then Noriko, reached out to take Arkady's hands. As the link closed, they searched for Sean.

They felt him almost immediately. His message was filled with concern: "What happened? I heard your call — I was about to answer, but everything went kind of wild, and then you were gone. Is everyone all right?"

"We're all fine" Arkady assured him. "Just some unexpected feedback in the link. Actually, we were worried about you. "

Sean's message seemed to carry a note of

embarrassment. 7 was with some . . . friends" he said. "It took me a minute to get free. "

It was clear that he was holding something back. But other matters were too pressing to pursue the question right now.

"What do we do next?" asked Philippa.

Instantly they received a series of mental images—a set of landmarks, and a trail leading to the mouth of a cave. "You'll have to go in there" Sean directed them. "That's where you'll find the baby"

Then he broke the connection.

Noriko opened her eyes. "Did he seem all right to you?" she demanded.

Arkady shook his head. "No," he said. "The signal was weak—it felt tired. I hope we aren't pushing him too much."

"Let's see if we can do the rest of this on our own," suggested Philippa grimly.

"Agreed," said Arkady. He motioned to the others, and together they set off through the underbrush.

Sean was fascinated. He had never seen so many of the colored lights in one place. And they were more intense than they had ever been, so bright it was almost painful. For a moment he wanted to shut them out. But of course, since they were inside his head, he couldn't simply close his eyes and turn away from them.

Circling the lights and leading up to them were the gray bubbles he had

come to recognize as theskies. Nearby, working their way toward the

balls of light, were the bars of color that represented his friends-all except Zach.

As soon as he thought of Zach, Sean saw the green bar that represented his friend's aura. It was moving rapidly, which probably meant Zach still was in the hovercar. He was surrounded by gray bubbles.

Satisfied that Zach was all right, Sean returned his attention to the rest of his friends, who were about to enter the cavern he had shown them through the eyes of the theskies. The five of them were clustered together, along with the less distinct bar of light that indicated Jacinta Yamoto. Gray bubbles, bars of light, and whirling balls of color: theskies, the other kids, and—what?

"You know" came the answer. "You've always known. You just refuse to believe."

"I don't knowT insisted Sean.

An image came into his head. He resisted it, and the doctors standing next to his bed watched unhappily as the unconscious boy writhed and twisted in his delirium.

Daphne peered into the mouth of the cave. "Dark!" she pronounced nervously, wrapping a strand of magenta hair around her finger.

"It's not at all like that other cave," observed Clea.

"What other cave?" asked Dr. Yamoto.

When Clea hesitated, Arkady stepped in. "The one that led us to the plateau during the earthquake expedition," he explained. "The one that no one was willing to believe in when we told them about it."

"I don't believe / heard about it," remarked Dr. Yamoto rather testily.

"We stopped talking about it early on," said Philippa, "once it became clear that anyone we told thought we were hallucinating."

Dr. Yamoto shook her head. "Oh, Zach-o," she whispered. Clea couldn't tell whether she was upset because Zach hadn't told her, or because he had put himself under so much pressure by keeping silent.

"We can't just stand here." Arkady was firm. "We must go on."

"But we can't see anything!" objected Daphne.

"Nonetheless, if the baby is in there, we have to go after her."

"Maybe we should try to contact Sean," suggested Clea.

Arkady shook his head. "He's exhausted. I'm afraid of overtiring him."

But Sean spoke to them anyway. It happened just as Philippa was tying a rope to a sapling that stood near the front of the cave. They planned to uncoil the rope as they worked their way into the darkness, to keep from getting lost if it should prove to be a large cavern. Of course, we have no idea whether or not this rope will be anywhere near long enough, thought Philippa nervously as she finished off the knot. She shivered at the idea of being lost in a completely dark cavern.

"Don't worry," said Sean. "Just step into the cavern and close your eyes. "

She reacted with a sense of surprise, sending him a startled question that

was expressed less in words than in feelings.

"Don't worry," he said again. *And forget about the rope. Just close your eyes. "

Philippa glanced up. It was clear from the puzzled looks around her that the others were also receiving the message.

"Shall we?" she asked.

Arkady shrugged. "We might as well."

Dr. Yamoto looked at them strangely. "What's going on?"

"Message from Sean," explained Clea. "he's got something new up his sleeve." She glanced at the others, then added, "We're going into the cavern now. I'm not sure what's going to happen. Maybe you'd better wait out here."

Jacinta Yamoto snorted, a sound that made it crystal clear that she had no intention of being left behind.

With Arkady in the lead, they entered the cavern one by one. The light, dim even at the mouth of the cave, filtered in only a little way. By the time they had gone only a few paces, the cave was dark enough to see Philippa's eyes glowing, a typical characteristic of Alphonionites.

"I'm lost already," complained Daphne when they rounded the first corner and found themselves plunged into total darkness.

"Close your eyes!" commanded Sean once more.

They hesitated. Noriko thought she could hear claws scraping on the rocks around them. Then she felt a theskie's head pushing against her hand.

"Close your eyes, " repeated Sean for the third time.

They did as he said and cried out in surprise at what happened next.

"What is it?" asked Dr. Yamoto as the chorus of astonished voices came to her through the darkness. "What's going on?"

No one answered. "Clea?" cried Dr. Yamoto. "Daphne?"

Still no answer. But it was clear from the sounds ahead of her that her son's friends were moving away from her, into the pitch black cavern, and they were oblivious to her questions.

7 don't understand this," thought Daphne desperately.

You don't have to understand" Sean's voice whispered in her mind. "Just use it "

Daphne nodded, and though the movement was lost in the darkness, she was aware that the current carried the impulse behind it, the thought of acceptance, to Sean.

But it was all so strange! Even though her eyes were closed, she could "see" the cavern with perfect clarity. It was as if everything in it was glowing with its own inner light. The smooth stone walls, the fanglike stalactites thrusting down from the ceiling, the sturdy stalagmites, even the puddles of brackish water scattered here and there across the rocky floor—all of them shone, so that the cave was perfectly limned in her mind. That this "sight" had something to do with the theskie which had come to her out of the darkness was obvious. Whenever she removed her hand from the creature's neck she

was immediately plunged into total blackness.

She tried opening her eyes. The vision disappeared and she was immediately engulfed in darkness.

"Ack!" complained the theskie beside her as she tightened her grip on its neck.

Even stranger than the glowing cavern was the appearance of her friends, each of whom was revealed to her engulfed by a bar of light. Beside each of her friends she could see the two-meter long form of a theskie; the creatures glowed soft and pearly gray in her mind.

As they traveled, Daphne became aware of a new sensation, a kind of buzzing in her head. No, buzzing was the wrong word for it. But there was definitely a—what? A kind of busyness that seemed to surround her. 'What's going on here?" she wondered.

But no one answered.

After the teens had walked for some time, they came to a place where the cavern walls drew closer together, forcing them to travel single file. As they went along, Daphne noticed that the roof of the cave was becoming lower. It's like walking through a tunnel made of light, she thought in amazement.

Suddenly Philippa, who was walking directly ahead of her, disappeared. Daphne cried out in fear, until she realized that the white-haired girl had simply turned a corner.

Her hand still on the theskie's neck, Daphne followed Philippa. She cried out again, this time in astonishment at what she "saw" as she turned the corner.

The tunnel had led them to a narrow ledge that overlooked a huge cavern. From their location of

about twenty meters above the cavern floor, they could see that the space was filled with hundreds, perhaps thousands, of quufers and theskies.

In the center of the cavern was a stone table.

And lying on the table, completely surrounded by quufers, was the tiny form of Virginia Dare Sacajawea Riedel-Mornette.

CHAPTER TEN

In the Cavern of the Quufers

i

Will Mornette lifted the broken stem of a doylan flower. His long fingers gently plucked a feathery-looking theskie scale from one of the flower's thorns. He examined the scale's markings.

"I think I've got it, Dad," he cried, trying to keep the exhaustion out of his voice.

His father was at his side almost instantly. He took the scale, stared at it. "Good work, son," he said after a moment.

The compliment warmed the tall teenager. Though Will was fairly skilled at tracking, his father had found most of the trail markings that had led them this far on their quest. It felt good to do something positive himself.

Oh, stuff the ego, Will scolded himself severely. All that counts now is finding Ginny!

A noise behind them caught his attention. The

sound was barely audible, so slight it might have been nothing more than the wind moving through some leaves. But in his hyperalert state everything seemed of importance to Will. He turned, and to his astonishment, saw Zach Yamoto approaching in a hovercar.

"Hey, Zach!" he cried, waving his arms. "This way!"

Now what's wrong with him? thought Will, when it became clear from his friend's face that he was less than pleased to see them. He watched in puzzlement as Zach slowed the hovercar, as if he was going to stop before he reached them, and then sped up once more, coming to rest just a meter or so from where they stood.

"What are you doing here, Zach?" asked Mr. Mornette sharply.

Zach seemed at a loss for words—a situation Will had never expected to see. The brown-haired boy closed his eyes for a moment, then opened them again.

Is he trying to use the current? thought Will. Realizing that he had been so intent on tracking the theskies who had stolen his half sister that he had been completely blocked to the current himself, he tried to open himself to any messages that might be coming from Zach. At first, all he could read was a kind of generalized panic. Then things began to fall together for him.

"Zach!" repeated Mr. Mornette. "I asked what you're doing out here."

7 can tell you what he's doing here," said Will grimly. "He knows where Ginny is."

Mr. Mornette looked at Zach closely. "Is that true?"

Zach nodded.

"Is she all right?"

"I think so," said Zach.

"What do you have to do with this?"

The accusation hidden in the question turned Zach's fear to anger. "I didn't have anything to do with it!" he snapped. Tm trying to undo it, the same as you are."

Mr. Mornette closed his eyes for a moment. "Pm sorry," he said. "Pm pretty tense right now. Where's my baby?"

"Up that way," Zach said miserably, gesturing vaguely toward the cave.

"How do you know this?"

"Believe me, Dad," Will cut in. "It's a long story—longer than you want to hear right now."

"All right," said Mr. Mornette impatiently. "If you know where Ginny is, we can save the details for later. Right now I just want to find her."

He climbed into the hovercar beside Zach.

"Move," he ordered.

The stalactites that hung from the cavern ceiling looked like icicles of light. Stalagmites several meters tall thrust up from the cavern floor like glowing fangs. Clustered among the stalagmites stood hundreds of theskies, staring at the strange scene taking place on the central platform.

Philippa's fingers found Arkady's muscular arm. She leaned against him. "What's going on down there?" she asked. She spoke softly, fearing that if

she startled the kwooing animals she might somehow endanger the baby.

"I don't know," whispered Arkady.

"Look," said Noriko quietly. "There's a path to the right of us."

Turning in the direction Noriko indicated, Philippa could "see" with the strange inner sight that had guided them this far that an extension of the ledge on which they stood sloped down to the cavern floor. In her mind it appeared as a line of light against the dimly glowing cavern wall. She tried to step toward it, but the theskie she was clinging to turned and hissed at her.

Philippa drew back with a startled cry. The moment her hand left the creature's neck she was plunged into total darkness. She forced herself to hold still.

"Arkady, help me," she whispered urgently. "I can't see." But before any of her friends could reply, the theskie had pressed its head beneath her hand once more, and the inner sight reasserted itself.

"I don't think they want us to go down there," said Arkady softly.

"He's right" came Sean's voice through the current. "Stay where you are for now. You'll be here to get the baby when they're done. But don't do anything to interrupt them now. Things are at a very delicate stage!"

"What are they doing?" demanded Daphne.

"Ginny is being initiated. She's going to — Oh hell, we've got trouble. I'll be back soon!"

It seemed like they all thought his name at once. But he was gone, leaving

them in the darkness of

the cavern with hundreds of theskies and quufers and one tiny baby.

Zach looked at Mr. Mornette beside him and swallowed uncomfortably. Now what do I do? he thought desperately. He tried to tap the current, but there was no response.

"Come on, Zach," urged Mr. Mornette impatiently. "Let's get going!"

"Wonderful!" thought Zach. "Where's our fearless leader when I really need him?"

"Right here," answered Sean tartly. "I can't be everywhere at once, you know!"

With a flash of guilt, Zach realized that Sean's communication was not only aggravated, it was tired—very tired.

"Sorry, " he thought sheepishly.

"Forget it," replied Sean. "Just stall Mr. Mornette as long as you can. Take him a roundabout way, drive as slowly as possible without making him suspicious — anything to buy a little time. But go ahead and bring him to the cave. Things will be over shortly, and he should be there then. "

The communication was filled with a kind of weariness, as if Sean knew this wasn't the best response to the situation but he simply couldn't come up with any other.

"Well, he knows more about what's going on than I do," thought Zach. "No point in trying to second guess him. "

All this took place in less time than it took Zach to clear his throat; less time than it took for him to turn to Mr. Mornette and say, "This is going to take a little while."

The five teenagers who had invaded the cavern of the quufers stood in perfect darkness, "watching" the events occurring below them through the images they received as long as they remained in physical contact with the theskies who had led them there. They had tried twice more to descend the ledge that led to the cavern floor. Both times, hissing theskies had barred their way. Now the cave was silent, save for the soft, gentle kwooing of the quufers and an occasional contented gurgle from the baby.

"Am I going out of my mind?" asked Noriko suddenly.

"If you are, then we all are," replied Daphne.

"You're getting it, too?" Arkady questioned them.

"If you mean are we picking up images from the baby," said Clea, "then the answer is yes. It's a little confusing. They keep flashing into my head and then disappearing."

"Just what is going on here?" asked Philippa plaintively.

"An initiation, " replied Sean in a message aimed at all of them.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Daphne asked.

Sean's message held tones of amusement. "Our little circle is about to get just a tiny bit bigger."

"The baby?" Clea's astonishment was apparent.

"That's right," said Sean. "She's being added to the current right now —"

"— Shhh!" he cautioned in reply to the flurry of questions that greeted this announcement. "Trouble coming!"

Zach was relieved to find his mother standing at the mouth of the cave.

"Jacinta?" said Mr. Mornette in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"Just along for the ride. Our kids seem to be running this particular show."

"What do you mean?"

"To tell you the truth," she said, Tm not quite sure. All I know is that the kids have gone in there." Dr. Yamoto gestured toward the mouth of the cave with a nod of her head. "I wasn't allowed to go with them. I tried."

"They wouldn't let you go?" asked Zach.

Dr. Yamoto shook her head. "It wasn't the kids," she said. "A group of theskies came and guided them into the cavern. However, none of the beasts seemed willing to take yours truly. I'd like to know what's going on here," she finished, looking pointedly at Zach.

Mr. Mornette grabbed his backpack from the hovercar and drew out a pair of handlamps. "Come on," he said, handing one of the lights to Will. "It's about time we found out."

Without waiting for a response, he plunged into the cave. Will glanced at Zach, then followed his father.

The two Yamotos nodded at one another, then slipped into the cave behind the Mornettes.

"Oh, my," murmured Dr. Yamoto as they rounded the corner where she'd been left behind the first time. "Who would have guessed?" For the handlamps revealed the area that before had

appeared to her only as sheer blackness to be a colorful realm of polished rock.

Will and his father, intent on following the trail of the theskies, were blind to the beauty around them. "This way," urged Will when they came to a fork in the tunnel. "Hurry." He let his father go ahead of him, and the beam of Mr. Mornette's lamp created eerie shadows as it struck the twisted rock formations.

Will cried out as he hit his forehead against a low-hanging stalactite. Clutching his wound, he continued down the tunnel after his father. Zach and his mother ducked to avoid the same formation, then followed as closely as they could.

Zach estimated that it was about ten minutes before they rounded the corner that brought them to the ledge where the others were gathered.

"Where's my baby?" Mr. Mornette demanded angrily.

"Dad," Will pleaded desperately.

But Mr. Mornette was too angry to hear anything but the need of his own heart. "Where . . . is . . . my baby?" he said slowly, his voice low and ferocious.

"She's down there." Arkady pointed into the darkness beyond the ledge. "If you wait a little while longer—"

"Are you crazy?" cried Mr. Mornette. "Wait for what?"

Daphne moved next to Will. "Open yourself to the current," she said urgently. "Listen to what Sean has to tell you."

Will took her hand and tried to drop his barriers. But before he could receive Sean's message,

his father swung his light around and cried out in horror as he saw the creatures assembled below. "Virginia!" he screamed.

An angry burst of sound exploded from the cavern.

"How do I get down there?" demanded Mr. Mornette. Without waiting for an answer, he swung his light around and spotted the descending ledge that would take him to the floor of the cavern. As he stepped toward it a pair of theskies detached themselves from the group and barred his path.

"Get out of the way!" he shouted, waving his arms at them. But these were not the shy, easily threatened creatures the colonists had come to know. The theskies opened their mouths and hissed. Their yellow fangs glistened in the light of the handlamp.

"Move!" Mr. Mornette yelled. When the theskies still didn't move, he reached into his shirt and pulled out a laser pistol.

"Dad!" cried Will. "Don't do it!"

But his father was already taking aim. Rushing forward, Will tried to knock his father's arm aside. He cried out in horror as his father lost his balance and tumbled off the rocky ledge.

"What's happening?" asked the medical technician standing beside Sean's bed.

The doctor shook her head. "I'm not sure," she said. "He's alive, but just barely. I can't figure it out. He seemed to have completely recovered. There was no reason for a relapse. But this coma appears even deeper than the one he was in

before. Unless things change, I'll be surprised if he lasts another hour."

"I suppose we'd better get his parents," resolved the technician.

"Call up his records first," the doctor advised. "I want to do a computer scan on possible allergic reactions to all the medication he's been given since he was first admitted."

Sean could hear the conversation with one part of his mind, but he gave it little attention. He was too absorbed in trying to deal with the truth that he had finally been forced to face—the truth about the whirling lights that had come to him in his coma.

Between that and helping his friends, he had little time for the doctors and their concerns.

Even so, he gave them new hope for his life when his body suddenly spasmed on the bed and he cried out, "Catch him, Will!"

During the scuffle on the ledge a theskie had wedged itself against Zach's

side. At a prompting that had come to him through the current, he placed his hand on the creature's neck and closed his eyes. To his astonishment, he could see the entire cavern, as if everything within it was glowing with some inner light that he'd never been aware of before.

But it was the drama right before him that captured his attention, a drama that centered on a terrified-looking Will Mornette, who was kneeling at the edge of the stony shelf where his father had disappeared. Will had the heels of his palms pressed against his eyes. Daphne had stepped up

.

behind him and was resting a hand on his shoulder. At first Zach thought it was gesture of sympathy.

But then he realized that something else was happening. Stepping forward, he peered over the ledge and saw Mr. Mornette's body hovering about a meter above the rocky floor—some twenty meters below them—suspended by his son's telekinesis.

The theskies had moved back, clearing a circle around him.

"Its all right" came a message from Sean. "You can set him down now. The theskies won't hurt him."

Slowly, Will lowered his father to the floor. The theskies retreated to a respectful distance.

And then the low kwooing noise that had been in the background began to grow louder. A sound like singing seemed to fill the cavern as the voices of a thousand quufers chirred and hummed in a strange harmony.

The theskies surrounding Mr. Mornette drew apart, forming an aisle. Two theskies walked slowly from the center of the cavern, carrying Virginia Dare Sacajawea Riedel-Mornette between them.

All this the teens could see through their connections with the theskies. But for Mr. Mornette, who lay in darkness, the moment of realization did not come until the theskies placed his baby daughter gently on his chest.

His sob of relief could be heard even on the ledge where the teenagers stood as he grasped the child. Zach felt his mother's hand tighten on his

shoulder, and he remembered she was in total darkness, not being a part of the current. A shudder of relief rippled through him. "Everything's all right, Mom," he told her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Uproar

The journey out of the cavern was far different from the trip in. Though they were still accompanied by theskies, the mysterious link had been broken and none of the teens could sense the inner glow of the world around them. Now they relied on the handlamps the Mornettes brought to guide them through the darkness.

Whether the link was gone because the theskies figured that once they had lights, the kids no longer needed the glow to guide them, or for some other reason—perhaps because the baby was safe, or the strange gathering in the cavern was over— no one was certain.

Will and his father walked at the front of the group, Mr. Mornette carrying Virginia, who slept contentedly in his arms. Will held one of the handlamps and was talking quietly to his father as

they walked. The rest of the kids walked together with Dr. Yamoto, who carried the second handlamp. She had examined the baby and declared Virginia perfectly fit despite her adventure. Once outside the cave, they all managed to squeeze into the hovercar.

They returned to find Ambora in an uproar. The authorities at the Med Dome had reviewed the security tapes and discovered that it was, indeed, theskies that had kidnapped the baby, but by that time the kids had disappeared. Shortly after that, Sean had lapsed into another coma. An emergency meeting to deal with "the theskie menace," as it was now being called, had been scheduled for that evening. Mr. Santori, on discovering the kids' absence from school, had issued a truancy document calling for their "forcible return to the premises." And half an hour before their return Sean had woken from his coma, declared that he was a little tired but otherwise fine, and demanded to be released from the Med Dome so that he could go home as scheduled.

All this the kids learned from Zach's father. Dr. Yamoto had called the commander on a private line to tell him they were coming, and he arranged to meet them outside the city. When he rode up on a hoverscooter, he looked as nervous as Zach had ever seen him.

"But everything's all right now, isn't it?" said Zach after his father had explained the situation. "I mean, we've got the baby. So what's the problem?"

"The problem is that too damn much that's too damn strange has been going on," replied Com-

mander Yamoto. "People are starting to panic, and it's making them

crazy."

"Not only that," said Zach's mother. "Even though the baby is safe, we have an awful lot of unanswered questions. Between what happened in Gandria, and this latest episode, people have decided theskies are not as harmless as we thought. Parents aren't going to feel comfortable letting their kids out on the streets while theskies roam free."

"What are you saying?" asked Clea in dismay.

Tm saying that people will want something done about the theskies," said Dr. Yamoto. "And I can't say that I blame them. I've got little ones myself, and I don't want theskies dragging them off to hidden caverns for some kind of secret ritual. I've got to know a lot more about what's been going on around here before I'll feel comfortable with these critters again."

"What about this truancy warrant?" asked Mr. Mornette. "Surely even that fool Santori can see that the kids were doing something important."

Yeah, thought Zach, though if you find out that my job was to delay your arrival I'll get to know what trouble really means.

"I think we can handle that easily enough," said Commander Yamoto. "Though it's going to be hard to convince him the whole crew needed to go along. I have a feeling you kids are going to spend a lot of time in front of investigating committees over the next few days."

"So what's new?" said Zach with a shrug.

"They never believed us before," grumbled Will.

"What makes you think they're going to start now?"

"I didn't say they would," replied Commander Yamoto darkly. "I'm just telling you what to expect."

"Okay," said Sean, barely able to conceal his irritation. "So I'm a little strange. Sorry. I meant to come out normal, but it just didn't work out that way. That doesn't mean you can hold me prisoner here."

Dr. Smedjen turned to Sean's father for support.

"The doctor's right, son," said Governor Matthews gently. "If you're still having trouble, you should stay here at the Med Dome."

Sean closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "Tell me," he said, trying to keep himself calm, "what did you do for me during this last—episode?"

"We observed you," replied Smedjen.

Sean slumped back in his chair. "There it is," he said bitterly. "I'm not a patient, I'm an experiment!"

Governor Matthews did not appear to be amused. "Doctor, is there anything you can actually do for Sean during one of these episodes?"

The doctor shrugged. "Certain drugs might be administered at a critical stage. We are hesitant about this because the drugs themselves could cause permanent damage. We would only use them as a last resort."

"Skip them," said Sean savagely. "I've got enough troubles as it is."

"Any idea what might be causing this?" asked the governor.

Dr. Smedjen steepled his fingers in front of his face. "Some sort of deep

brain damage. If we were on Earth, we might be able to locate it. But of course, our tools here are relatively primitive."

Governor Matthews waved aside the disclaimer. "Set up a remote monitoring system," he said. "You can keep an eye on him that way. I happen to believe people heal better at home."

The doctor frowned but nodded his assent. "Now listen, young man," he said, turning to Sean. Tm letting you out against my better judgement. But there's one point on which I'm not budging: You don't touch the controls of a hover-vehicle until we have this under control. I don't want you going into a trance while you're driving!"

Sean swallowed hard but nodded his agreement. He watched in satisfaction as the doctor signed the release papers.

"Thanks, Dad," he said as he and his father left the Med Dome together.

"Forget it," Governor Matthews replied gruffly. "I just wanted you home where I could keep an eye on you."

Sean smiled and climbed into the hovercar beside his father.

"I don't know, Daff," Zach said cautiously later that afternoon. "Do you think maybe we should just give up on this party idea for the time being?"

He couldn't help but smile at the look of horror he saw on the screen of his comm-link.

"Give up?" shrieked Daphne. Though the shriek

was an act, her reaction itself was genuine. "Give up? Zach, this particular combination of moons and tides won't come again for five years. We'll be old by then. Some of us may have gone to other planets—"

Daphne stopped in mid-rant, struck by the idea that some of them might actually leave the current someday. A part of her thought that would be a wonderful relief; sometimes the closeness of this thing could be suffocating.

But to lose even one of the others . . . Daphne shook her head. She didn't like the idea, not at all. She knew she would never be this close to anyone else. Their group had a kind of connection human beings had never before experienced. Annoying as it could be, she didn't think she wanted to let it go. Somehow, the idea seemed very lonely.

"No, we won't give up on it," she finished. "It's still four days away. That should give us plenty of time to finish planning. And if there's any trouble with permission, I'm counting on you to talk everyone into it."

"Yes, ma'am!" said Zach.

Daphne wrinkled her nose at him. "Gotta go," she said. "Will's expecting me at his place. We're going over to the Med Dome to visit his mom and the baby."

"Say hello for me," said Zach. "I'll probably be locked in my father's office, getting a complete grilling about what's really going on in Ambora."

"So tell him the truth," shrugged Daphne. "You're lucky. Your folks are actually apt to believe you."

She flipped off the comm-link, ran her fingers

through her magenta hair, and headed for her date with Will.

"I was beginning to wonder if you were coming," said Will when Daphne arrived at the Mornette dome.

"I had to talk to Zach about the party," she explained.

Will frowned. "You're spending an awful lot of time talking to Zach lately."

Daphne's laughter was like the tinkle of chimes in the wind. U I asked if you wanted to help me plan the party," she said. "You told me you'd rather marry a theskie."

"I was only kidding."

As they were heading out the door they got a message from Sean: "Meeting tonight at my place. Be there!"

Philippa and Clea were sitting in Clea's room when Sean's message came.

"I'm glad he's feeling better," Philippa remarked. "But I think he's even bossier than he used to be."

Clea laughed. "Maybe he's just trying to keep it short," she answered. "It seems to be an effort for him to use the current that way."

"I'd like to know how he does it," said Philippa, tossing her ice-white hair back over her shoulders. "None of the rest of us can send messages like that, at least not on our own, and not so clearly and consistently. What's going on with him?"

Clea shrugged. "That's one of about a dozen questions I'd like answered," she said. "Maybe we'll find out tonight. I have a feeling this whole thing is coming to a head."

Philippa looked nervous. "Do you suppose anyone is going to believe us this time around?"

"I think the odds are improving. And we've got Dr. Yamoto and Mr. Mornette as witnesses. They don't know what's really going on, but they can certainly testify that at least some of the weird stuff we're saying is true."

"Testify?" Philippa raised her eyebrows. "Like in a trial?"

"Well, that's not what I meant," Clea said. "But I wouldn't be surprised if it comes down to something like that. My parents are plenty upset about the theskies—the quufers, too, for that matter. And you know how mellow my parents are. If they're upset, I'd guess that most of the colonists are ready for some really tough action."

"How tough?"

Clea looked unhappy. "Very tough."

"But the laws about native species—"

"As my father says, laws don't mean much when people think their kids are in danger." Clea scooped a quufer off her bed and snuggled the fluffy creature against her neck. "I'm worried about what might happen to these little guys," she said.

"I'm worried about what those little guys are up to," Philippa retorted. "What were they doing with that baby, anyway?"

Clea pulled the quufer away from her neck and stared at it nervously. It looked so harmless and innocent, but what exactly had all those quufers been up to? She was still wondering about Philippa's question when they headed for Sean's later that evening.

"You know, I think he's looking better," whis-

pered Philippa shortly after they came in. Clea had to agree. Sean seemed lighter, more at ease than she had seen him at any time since he'd come out of his coma.

The group sat in the dome's main room. The curving arcs of the large airy

space reflected the fact that Sean's mother was an architect; the strange objects that covered the tables and hung from the walls—souvenirs gathered from across the galaxy—testified to his father's career in planetary service.

Arkady and Noriko had already arrived and were setting out trays of snacks. Sean was settled in a recliner, complaining that in return for being allowed to come home he'd been forced to take a solemn oath to avoid almost all physical activity for the next several days.

"Where are your folks?" asked Philippa as Noriko went to answer the door chimes.

"Where aren't they?" replied Sean. "It seems like every committee in the colony is having an emergency meeting tonight. They'll be all over Ambora like theskie scales. I expect they'll come home late, and probably pretty cranky."

"Then we'd better get right to work," said Zach, strolling in just ahead of Will and Daphne.

Sean nodded, and as soon as everyone was settled in, he began. "I want to apologize to you guys for the mysterious way I've been behaving since the accident. To tell you the truth, for a while I thought I was going crazy. Even after I decided I wasn't, I figured that if I told you what I was experiencing, you'd think I was nuts after all.

And that was before I finally accepted everything that was happening to me."

"Well, the current is sure happening to you," said Daphne. "How come you can use it better than any of us?"

"I've got friends in high places," Sean replied. "Which is exactly what we've got to talk about. The truth is . . ." He paused. "Hell, there's no easy way around this. The truth is, the eight of us have stumbled into the situation the human race has been praying for—and dreading—ever since we discovered faster-than-light travel." He took a deep breath. "We've finally discovered another intelligent species."

"I knew it!" cried Daphne. "I knew the theskies were intelligent!"

Sean shook his head. "It's not the theskies," he said slowly. "They're even dumber than we thought."

"But—"

He held up his hands for silence. "It's not the theskies," he repeated slowly. "It's the quufers."

CHAPTER TWELVE

A Song Without Words, A Story Told in Pictures

Zach stared at his best friend in astonishment. The quufers? He could hear the others questioning Sean. Their voices held disbelief, and the kind of fear that the unknown can produce. He read a growing despair in Sean's face.

"Do you know just what the current is?" asked Daphne.

"We all pretty much know what it is," said Philippa. "What I want to know is what caused it."

Will nodded, adding, "And how it works."

"Well, I want to get back to the whole thing about the quufers," demanded Clea, glancing nervously at the fluffy blob perched atop the chair behind her.

"It's all tied together," said Sean. "The quufers are the source of the current."

He held up his hands as several voices started to interrupt. "Let me get through this, will you?" he snapped. Then he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and apologized. Tm sorry. But I've been dreading this for a long time —fighting it, really. I didn't want to admit, even to myself, what I learned while I was in my coma. I knew most people would think I was crazy. For a while, / thought I was crazy. You're the only ones I can count on to listen to me. So please, just listen. Then you can call me crazy if you want. But for now, just let me talk. All right?"

He looked around the group. One by one the others nodded, some of them looking a little shamefaced. Noriko, who was sitting beside him, reached out and took his hand.

"This whole thing really goes back to that night on the plateau," Sean began. "That's when the creatures . . . No, creatures is the wrong word. They're not just creatures. They're intelligent, thinking beings—something we might have suspected that night on the plateau, if we weren't so convinced that intelligent life has to look somehow vaguely human."

"But we saw quufers in the visions that night," said Arkady. "They were pets!"

Sean nodded. "That's true. And what happened to move them to what they are now, f can't say. But the fact is, it was the quufers who called us to the plateau that night."

"I thought the call came from the recording device," said Zach.

Sean shook his head. "It was the quufers. They directed us to the device because they wanted us

to experience that recording, to see what had happened here on Gauguin in the past."

"Why?"

"I'm not sure," said Sean. "Now are you going to let me tell this my way or not?"

"Sorry," muttered Zach.

Sean shrugged. Til try to answer your questions when I'm finished. But I can tell you right now that I won't be able to give you all the information you want. Even though I'm ahead of the rest of you when it comes to quufer communications, the link is still pretty fuzzy. That's why the quufers had the theskies bring them the baby, by the way—they were hoping that if they could initiate her into the current while her brain was still relatively malleable, they might have better luck communicating with her than they've had with us."

He smiled ruefully. "It's not pleasant to be considered thick-headed and over-the-hill by a bunch of walking pillows," he said. "But there you have it. Anyway, when Barrett sent me into a coma, it gave the quufers a better chance to get through to me. All my defenses, conscious and unconscious, were down. They were already linked to me, and so they were able to come inside and 'visit' while all the rest of you were stuck outside my head wondering if I was going to live or not.

"In fact," he continued, scooping up a quufer that was just waddling past his feet, "there were two things that kept me from just drifting away and never waking up again. One was the quufers talking to me inside—the other was all the time Zach spent talking to me from the outside."

He looked at his friend and said softly, "I owe you for that one, buddy."

Zach felt his cheeks grow warm with a pleasant embarrassment. "Don't mention it," he said with a shrug.

Sean stroked the quufer sitting in his lap. The animal chittered in pleasure.

"I could 'see' four kinds of things while I was in the darkness," he continued. "One was a kind of gray bubble. After a while, I realized that the bubbles were theskies. I'd feel dumb about how long it took me to figure that out, except it was so weird I don't think any one else would have believed it either. I also saw these shafts of colored light that I finally realized represented you guys. I guess you might call them auras. Actually, I could see them for everyone in the colony, but because of the current, I could sense you guys far more strongly. Everyone else was pale and distant; you were strong and clear. Once I got used to the idea, I could reach you almost instantly—primarily because you're all linked to the quufers. The third thing I could see was the quufers, though I refused to believe that's what they were until earlier today. I mean, look at this thing. . . ."

He picked up the quufer sitting in his lap. It was slightly bigger around than a dinner plate, and resembled nothing so much as a fluffy cushion. "Can you blame me for being unwilling to believe that these guys are intelligent? But they are. In fact, I have a sinking feeling that they may be smarter than we are."

The quufer squirmed a little, and Sean set it back on his lap. "The thing is, it's a different kind

of intelligence. And it's augmented by the fact that they're all linked by the current, so they can work together to figure things out."

"Like parallel processing in a computer," observed Philippa.

Sean nodded. "That's a pretty good analogy," he said. "I don't know how smart these guys are when you take them one at a time. But when they put their brains together, watch out!"

"So where do the theskies come into all this?" asked Will.

"The quufers and the theskies have a symbiotic relationship," explained Sean. "The quufers act as brains for the theskies, and the theskies act as legs and arms for the quufers. For example—oh, hell. This sounds like a lecture. Wait a minute."

Sean closed his eyes. The quufer sitting on his lap climbed up onto his shoulder. At the same time, Zach noticed that the quufer sitting behind Clea seemed to shift and become more alert.

Sean opened his eyes. "I think the easiest way to make you understand is to show you," he said. "Are you ready to see the quufer/theskie combination in action?"

The others shifted nervously. Sean laughed. "What's the matter?" he asked. "Don't you want to link minds with a bunch of fluffballs?" His voice held just a hint of bitterness.

"What do we have to do?" asked Zach.

"Same drill you've been using," said Sean. "Join hands to tighten the circle. I'll be the focus point. The quufers will give me images, and I'll pass them on to you. It's going to be a little confusing—I've told you, even though they've been playing around

inside my head for the last few weeks, we don't have a perfect link. Never will, since I'm too old for them to do that much rewiring. But you'll still get more information than you would if I just sat here and talked at you. Are you game?"

Zach nodded.

"I'm up for it," said Noriko.

"Count me in," agreed Arkady.

Clea sat cross-legged on the floor, and held out her hands. Soon the others had joined her. Sean was sitting between Noriko and Arkady. He took their hands, and the circle was complete.

The first thing Clea sensed was welcome. The quufers were pleased at this meeting. No, more than pleased. Joyful.

It came to her like a song, a swelling surge of something that came not in words, not in pictures, not even in sounds, though it had a definite rhythm and harmony. It was just—welcoming.

After a moment she became aware of the others. They were bands of light, just as Sean had said. Red, yellow, gold, and green, breathtaking in their loveliness.

How nice, she thought contentedly, to find that your friends are so

beautiful.

A web of light, delicate strands of every color, seemed to weave between them—lines that went from each of them to all the others, a multi-hued net of connections. Then she noticed that there were stronger bands, indicating special ties. The light that crackled between Sean and Noriko was almost blinding.

Then she spotted the band that tied her to Zach.

Everyone can see it! she thought in embarrassment.

But underneath she felt warmed by the vision.

A whirl of color caught her eye. Is that a quufer? she thought in astonishment. The beauty and intensity delighted her. Creatures so simple, even silly, in everyday life, were exquisite in this form of reality.

She saw another of the whirling lights close to Sean. Must be the quufer that was sitting on his lap, she thought. And then others began to appear.

She realized with a chill that she had entered a different state of being.

When she found herself floating close to a gray bubble, she heard Sean's voice whisper in her mind. 'These bubbles are the theskies. Let yourself merge with them"

Hesitantly, she let herself drift against the bubble. An instant of resistance, and then she was seeing the world the same way she had in the cavern earlier that day. Everything was illuminated by an inner glow all its own.

How beautiful, she thought as she stared at the shimmering, sparkling world.

Somewhere beside her she sensed the dim consciousness of the theskie.

u lfyou try, you can communicate with them" said Sean. She realized he was speaking to all of them. "They'll go where you tell them, be your eyes and your legs, just as they are for the quufers. Try itr

Clea looked around. She saw something ahead that she wanted to examine more closely. Almost

as soon as the thought had formulated, the theskie began trotting toward it.

She realized that what she had spotted was a little animal. Suddenly she felt a wave of hunger wash through her.

No! she thought. Vm not ready for that!

She could sense the theskie's disappointment as she forced it to turn aside from the juicy tidbit.

Another message came to her, not from Sean, but from the quufers. It was a call, an invitation. Come back, it said, in feelings more than in words. Thoughts of home, of welcome, of friends and family flowed through her.

And then she found herself back in the circle with the others.

Clea felt as if she was standing at the edge of something vast and wonderful. It flowed around her, harmony and rhythm, the sense of a rich and caring community.

And under it all, one more sensation, one more emotion that quivered through the rhythms of the mental link Sean had forged for them.

Clea shivered. The feeling was fear.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The Silent Witnesses

Will looked at his hands. His long fingers trembled with the residue of the fear he had picked up from the quufers. "What is it?" he asked. "What are they afraid of?"

"Us," replied Sean.

Will looked up. The weariness he heard in Sean's voice was also reflected in his friend's green eyes.

"Why are they afraid of us?" asked Daphne, who was sitting opposite Sean in the circle on the floor.

"Isn't it obvious?" asked Zach. "We've come blundering onto their planet with our rockets and our cities and our machines—all this wonderful stuff we think shows how bright we are—and we're not even smart enough to realize there's intelligent life all around us. We're going to roll right over them. And they know it."

"Well put," said Sean. "But I think there's some-

thing else, too, something I haven't been able to pin down yet." He shook his head in frustration. "The link just isn't clear enough. I can't translate the feelings, the pictures, into something that makes total sense to me. There's more. But I don't know what it is."

"Is it possible that their own fear is blocking the communication?" asked Philippa.

"How much can you communicate with them?" Clea persisted. "Can you actually talk to them? Do they tell you things?"

"Not really," Sean said. "The communication is never in words, though I end up interpreting it that way. It's like that night on the plateau when we kept feeling like someone was calling us to 'come and bear witness.' You know we never actually heard those words; it was all feelings and pictures. It's still the same way, except the feelings are stronger, the pictures sharper—and getting sharper all the time. The quufers invite me to join them, to see things. I resisted for a long time, mostly because it scared me so much."

"So what do we do now?" asked Noriko.

"We do what we were supposed to do all along," said Clea firmly. "We bear witness."

"Are you sure it's not too late?" asked Arkady.

Clea looked puzzled. "What do you mean?"

The Thetan shrugged his massive shoulders. "People in this colony are out for blood. Sure, the League has laws protecting native life-forms. But laws have never made much difference when people are in a lynching mood. If they kill some theskies, that will be sad. But everyone knows that the quufers were

in on the kidnapping, too. What

if they decide to start clearing the area of quufers?"

Will's face was white. He closed his eyes and swallowed. His stomach seemed to be tying itself in knots. "You know what we're talking about, don't you?" he asked hoarsely. Before anyone could speak, he answered his own question. "We're talking about a massacre of intelligent creatures. We're talking about humans—our friends and families—killing dozens, hundreds, maybe thousands of intelligent creatures because they used my sister to try to communicate with us." He paused. "We're talking about genocide."

A sick silence seemed to settle over the group. The only sound was the soft, anxious kwooing of the quufers.

Do the quufers understand what he just said? wondered Clea. Did they pick up the images from our minds? She looked at the quufer behind her and wondered if it saw the human race as an invading army of murderers.

"It's time to do what we were asked to do months ago," she said. "Up till now we've been afraid. We've hidden. But we can't hide anymore. We can't stay silent. We have to tell people what we know." She looked around at the others. "We have to bear witness."

For a moment no one spoke.

"People are going to laugh at us," whispered Daphne.

"Let them laugh," said Clea savagely.

"No," Zach disagreed. "Simply toughing it out won't get us anywhere. If we tell what we know and everyone just laughs, it won't do the quufers

any good. We have to find some way to convince people."

"Fine." Noriko picked up the quufer that had been nestled beside her. "Look at this," she ordered. "Now you tell me: How do we convince people that this understaffed pillow is smarter than we are?"

"We don't," Sean said. "We show them. Which means it's probably going to be up to me, since I have the closest link with the critters."

Zach began to laugh. "Sorry," he apologized. "I know it's not funny. But I can't help imagining the look on your father's face when you tell him you talk to quufers. I'd love to be there to see it!"

"You're welcome to take my place," said Sean, smiling in spite of himself. He shook his head. "I don't know who I feel more sorry for—me, or Dad."

"Speaking of your father ..." Arkady began. He let the sentence hang in the air, uncertain whether Sean wanted to bring the others in on the problems faced by the governor.

Sean paused, seemed to turn in on himself for a moment.

Is he consulting the quufers, wondered Arkady, or just thinking?

It seemed odd to imagine his friend turning to the lumpish animals scattered about the room when he wanted advice. Arkady looked around. There seemed to be more of them now than there had been when they started this meeting.

Sean came to a decision. "Well," he said to them all, "as long as we're

trying to solve the world's problems, we might as well take this one on, too."

Quickly he outlined what he had told Arkady before the kidnapping of Ginny Riedel-Mornette had caught the full attention of everyone in the colony.

"That's terrible!" Daphne exclaimed. "None of this is your father's fault. Why is the League going to punish him?"

"It happened on his watch," said Sean. "Somebody has to take the blame. Anyway, that's not the point right now. The point is, is there any way we can figure out who the traitor in his government is?"

"Let's ask the quufers," suggested Clea.

The remark brought a scattering of laughter.

"I'm not kidding," she said.

"Why would they know anything about this?" asked Will. "Traitors work in secret meetings. They send messages in code. It's not the kind of thing a quufer would be able to spot."

"I'm not sure I agree," countered Arkady. "Remember, those miners were killing theskies. You can bet the quufers paid attention to thatl"

"I hope they don't think all humans are like that," said Clea. "It makes me ashamed to think about it."

"Don't be so sentimental," Noriko chided her lightly. "We're not a species of vegetarians, and from what Sean said, the quufers aren't either. If they eat meat, I don't see that they can get too upset about someone killing an animal."

"That's not the point," Zach interjected quickly. "If the theskies and the quufers have this special partnership, then it would upset them to see theskies killed."

"I doubt our traitor would have been around when that happened," said Philippa. "He—or she—seemed to have been working pretty hard to avoid being connected with the miners. If the miners had known the traitor's identity, one of them would have revealed it when they were questioned. The rules for using truth-induction techniques are pretty strict, but I'm sure our friends from up in the hills qualify for that kind of treatment."

"What you're forgetting," Arkady mentioned, "is that figuring something like that out may be partly a matter of seeing it, partly a matter of interpreting what you've seen. The quufers may have seen things that wouldn't mean much to them, but that would give us a clue as to who the traitor is."

"Like in those old stories about Sherlock Holmes," said Zach, perking up a little. He stood up, excited by the idea.

"Who?" asked Clea.

"Sherlock Holmes was this great detective I used to read about. He could tell all kinds of stuff about someone just by looking at something like their pocketwatch or their shoes. It was almost like he was psychic—except he always had a logical explanation. He just looked more carefully than anyone else and really thought about what he saw."

"Exactly," said Arkady.

Daphne picked up a quufer that had snuggled up beside her. "Well, I get the feeling these little guys have been watching everything human beings have done since we landed on Gauguin," she

said. "Maybe they have seen something we can use."

Arkady looked at Sean. "Is there a way to find out?" he asked.

"We could try asking them," replied Sean. "I don't know how much they can show us from memory."

"The question is, what's the question?" Zach wondered aloud.

Daphne gave him a queer look. "You wanna run that by me again? I think I had a quufer in my ear."

Zach smiled. "We have to figure out what information we want, and the best way to ask for it. Otherwise, the quufers won't have any idea what we're talking about."

"It's like working with a computer," Philippa noted. "You have to ask right question to get the right answer."

Zach nodded. "So the question is," he repeated, "what's the question? What do we ask the quufers?"

"This is giving me a headache," Daphne moaned.

Sean laughed. "Zach's got a good point," he commented. "But so does Daphne. We're not going to solve this by committee, at least not tonight. I think a couple of us ought to have a brainstorming session to figure out what the quufers might have seen that could be of value! Arkady, you're as much of a detective as we've got. Why don't you stay for a while after the others go and talk this over with me and Noriko."

"Our fearless leader must be healing," said Zach. "He's giving orders again."

Despite the smile that accompanied it, the

comment stung. Sean was about to snap back when he caught a wave of feeling from Zach.

Jealousy? he thought in surprise. / don't get it.

Before he could figure out the situation, Daphne was climbing to her feet. "He can give all the orders he wants," she said with a sigh. "This little Gauguinian has got work to do if we're going to have that party on the beach in two nights. Since I'm not a detective, I'll head out now, unless there's something else that needs doing?"

When Sean shook his head, Daphne bent over and kissed him on the cheek. "Good to have you home, hero," she said softly.

Her exit seemed to create a signal for the group to break up. Soon, only Arkady and Noriko were left.

"Why didn't you invite Zach to stay and help us?" asked Noriko when the others had gone.

"He could have stayed if he wanted to," Sean said.

"I know that. But he's feeling left out right now. He needed you to ask him."

Sean looked puzzled. "What are you talking about?"

Noriko sighed. "Never mind," she said. "We've got planning to do. I'll try to civilize you tomorrow."

Sean looked like he was about to argue, but after a moment he turned to Arkady and said, "So, any ideas on where to start this search?"

Arkady nodded. "A few. The way I see it, our traitor has to be someone who was on planet for quite a while. Otherwise he—or she—wouldn't

have had time to set up the methods they used to keep their presence a secret."

"That makes sense," Sean agreed.

"Also, it has to be someone who has access to the main computer, and the ability to tamper with it to change the malium cargo information."

Noriko recalled how the loading cargo information in the computer had been changed so that the malium that was being smuggled would go undetected. The ploy had almost worked, until she and Daphne accidentally stumbled upon the inconsistency. Their discovery triggered an entirely new series of life-threatening events involving the gang and the malium miners. Noriko shuddered at the memory.

"Well, we can start to narrow the field a bit with a little computer work of our own," Arkady resolved. "Sean, I'll need your help, since you probably know codes for getting to parts of the database that I can't access."

Sean nodded. "What's one more little crime added to our list?" he asked grimly.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Silent No Longer

Later that night Sean was awakened by angry voices.

"What are you going to do?" cried a man. "Come on, Governor, we want some action!"

When he opened his eyes, Sean realized he had fallen asleep in the living room. Several quufers were nestled next to him. He pushed them away, and using the chair he sat in for support, he rose to his feet. The room was dark, the automatic sensors having turned out the lights when he fell asleep. But he could see a light near the main entrance.

"You heard him, Governor," called another voice. "Either you do it, or we do it!"

"What you'd better do right now is go home," came the response of a familiar voice, and Sean felt an unexpected wave of relief, realizing that his

father was actually here. Still unsteady on his feet, he moved carefully toward the dome's main entrance.

His parents were standing there, his mother with her hand resting on his father's shoulder.

"What's going on?" he asked.

Although he spoke softly, his mother jumped at the sound of his voice. Pressing her free hand against her chest, she whispered, "People—a mob of people—are demanding action concerning the theskies and the quufers."

"What kind of action?"

"Roundup," she said. "Shipping out. Elimination."

Sean's heart began to race. "They can't imagine the League would let us get away with anything like that," he whispered desperately. "They know the rules protecting native life forms."

"It doesn't matter," she said, "not when they think their own children are at risk. Besides, there's a provision in the Native Protection Act that lifts the ban on killing native creatures if they can be proven a clear and present danger to a human population."

"What's it going to be, Governor?" demanded a woman.

"It's going to be peace and quiet for now," replied Governor Matthews, his voice deep and firm. "Seal your homes. Eject your pets. Let colony officials escort your children to school tomorrow, or do it yourself. But don't take any action against the animals, or the League may yank this whole colony right off the planet."

The crowd muttered angrily, but no one else spoke.

"Good night, ladies and gentlemen," said the governor firmly. He touched a panel at the side of the door and it slid shut.

"Will they really hurt the quufers and the theskies?" asked Sean when his father had turned away from the door.

"They might." He sighed wearily. "That's the last thing I need—a massacre of native creatures. I might as well kiss my career good-bye right now."

"But they can't," Sean said desperately. "They mustn't."

"Well I know that," his father replied wearily. "Though you might try saying something to your old girlfriend Philippa, since her parents are the ones heading up this whole group. Space knows why—they don't even have younger children. I think they just like stirring up trouble."

"You don't understand." Sean took a deep breath. His head felt like it was about to explode. How could he tell his father what he knew? His parents would probably decide he was delirious and send him back to the Med Dome.

One of the quufers that had been in the chair with him scuttled across the floor and settled against his bare feet. Sean gasped as the message seemed to pound in his brain: "Someone must bear witness!"

His parents were staring at him. He could tell by the tense way his father stood that he was ready to move fast. What were they expecting? That he would faint—or even worse, go into some kind of wild fit?

He took a deep breath. "Listen," he said, trying to keep his voice from trembling. "This is more important than you imagine. It's not just a matter of protecting a native species. There's something more those people don't understand." He paused, took a breath, and said it: "There's another sentient species on the planet—and it's the quufers.

His father was silent; his mother started to cry.

Zach Yamoto squirmed uncomfortably in his chair as Governor Matthews used his gavel to bring the crowded hearing room to order. Zach glanced at Philippa, who was sitting to his right. She was motionless, her chiseled features so smooth and white she might have been carved from Vespen Milkstone. Yet Zach could feel her internal turmoil almost as clearly as his own. The double sense— that of a frozen exterior covering a boiling interior —almost made him dizzy.

Sean was sitting on the other side of him, his hoverchair half blocking the aisle that ran down the center of the hearing room. The others were nearby, all of them on edge as they waited to be called to give their testimony.

Zach knew that one reason Philippa was so nervous was that her father—Allen Bidding—had become the leading spokesperson for the campaign to exterminate the local populations of theskies and quufers. He was scheduled to speak ahead of them.

Mr. Bidding's presentation was sharp and damaging.

"We cannot leave our children unprotected," he pronounced, his voice catching in his throat as

though he was holding back a sob. "If the human population on Gauguin is to thrive, we must turn back this threat now. There can be no peace, there

can be no safety, there can be no growth while this situation goes unmended. We came here willing to live in peace with the theskies and the quufers. But now they have shown themselves for the menaces they are. We cannot remain silent. We cannot allow this to happen again. The future of humanity on Gauguin is at stake."

Zach nudged Sean, then made a gagging motion to indicate his reaction to Mr. Bidding's speech. Sean nodded grimly, but immediately turned his attention forward again, lines of worry creasing his forehead.

"Thank you, Allen," said Governor Matthews, who was chairing the hearing. "We appreciate your concerns. You may step down."

The governor glanced at a flimsy in front of him, then called the next witness: Ivan Santori.

Through the current Zach sensed a ripple of anger in the Circle as the sharp-tongued vice principal came forward. The anger turned to despair as Santori began his testimony. Instead of the acid tones and bitter words that had made every kid in Bradbury School despise him, Santori spoke smoothly, and movingly, of the need to protect Ambora's children.

Daphne, who was sitting behind Zach, leaned forward and whispered in his ear. "What an actor!" she hissed, her voice filled with grudging admiration. "You'd never know the only reason he wants to keep kids safe is so he can push them around."

Zach nodded but said nothing. Sean was up

next, and he was busy worrying on his friend's behalf. The applause that greeted Santori's remarks did nothing to relieve his anxiety.

"I'm going to pass the gavel now," announced Governor Matthews, "as I have a close relationship with the next witness." He looked to Dr. Ives. "Will you handle the questioning, please?"

Dr. Ives nodded. "Would Sean Matthews please take the stand," he called.

Sean pushed a button at the side of his chair. The yellow pressor beam thrust out from its base, raising the chair a centimer and a half above the floor. He pressed another button, and the chair glided forward.

As Sean approached the front of the hearing room his stomach knotted with dread. His long conversation with his parents the night before had proved what he'd suspected all along: Convincing people of the truth about the quufers and theskies was going to be nearly impossible.

Dr. Ives glanced down at his notes as Sean steered the hoverchair into position. "Sean," he began, "you and your circle of friends have been involved in several strange situations over the last few months, most recently the rescue of the Riedel-Mornette baby. What we want to know right now is how your friends were able to locate the infant."

"I told them where she was," Sean replied matter-of-factly.

Dr. Ives scowled. "Did you have anything to do with her abduction?"

"Of course not!"

"Then how did you know where she was?"

Sean hesitated. This was the moment he had been dreading, the time when the whole thing had to come into the open.

"The quufers told me," he said.

A murmur of disbelief greeted this announcement. Sean felt his cheeks grow warm as people began to laugh. The whispering grew louder.

"Silence!" commanded Dr. Ives, pounding the gavel against the hearing bench. "Silence, or I'll clear the room."

He waited for the noise to die down, then turned to Sean again. "Are you speaking metaphorically?" he asked. "Do you mean you read the quufers' behavior and were able to interpret it to discover where they had taken the baby?"

Sean shook his head. "I meant exactly what I said. The quufers told me."

Dr Ives looked worried. "Are you saying that the quufers spoke to you?" he asked. There was more laughter.

Sean nodded. He swallowed, then he said it. "You have to understand—the quufers are a sentient species. They're every bit as intelligent as human beings."

The room was silent now, an uncomfortable silence.

Ivan Santori stood up. "Dr. Ives, I must protest. Clearly Mr. Matthews is still suffering delusional side effects from his recent head injury. I see no point in forcing him to embarrass himself and his family with testimony he will only regret later."

He actually sounds like he means it, Sean marvelled.

Dr. Ives glanced at Sean's father.

He's going to dismiss me, thought Sean. He felt a moment of relief. He had done his job, he had borne witness. If no one believed him, that was hardly his fault.

But the relief faded almost instantly as he was overwhelmed by a sending from the quufers. "Please! You must bear witness!"

The message was desperate, the need intense, and Sean knew what he had to do.

"I know that you must think I'm crazy," he said. "But if you'll only let me, I can prove what I'm saying."

"This hearing is too important for such nonsense!" objected Mr. Santori in a sharp tone. Again, small conversations broke out across the room. Dr. Ives banged his gavel sharply. "I want order, or I will clear the Hearing Room!" he shouted.

When the noise had subsided he said gently to Sean, "I think we should save your testimony for another day."

"Don't humor me!" snapped Sean. "I'm not crazy."

"I didn't say you were," Dr. Ives replied patiently. "However, I don't think you have anything to add to this hearing right now."

"Of course he does!"

Sean was surprised to see Will Mornette striding forward, his lean face flushed with anger.

"You're trying to silence the only person who can tell you what's really going on around here," Will insisted angrily, raising his voice to be heard above the rap of Dr. Ives's gavel. "I thought you were different. I thought you were better. But it's

the same, it's the same as it's always been. You don't want to hear the truth, any more than the rest of them do—any more than humans have ever wanted to hear this kind of truth. Because you know that if you do, you can't just claim the planet in the name of humanity."

"Silence!" shouted Dr. Ives, thumping his gavel again. "Silence."

"No!" Will protested, shaking his head. "We've been silent too long already." His voice trembled with emotion. "My father has told me about silence. He's told me how it can hide things that are wrong and make them seem all right. He told me about the silence that covered what was done to the American Indian people for five hundred years and more. Silence. Be silent. Just let it happen. Don't cause trouble. But we can't be silent. We were called to be witnesses."

He turned back to face the hearing room.

"Stand up," he ordered. "If you know the truth about the quufers and the theskies, stand up."

After a pause no longer than a heartbeat, the other members of the Circle rose to their feet. To the surprise of everyone except Sean, so did Governor Matthews.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Night of the Farthest Tide

Later that day Sean sat in his hoverchair facing the select group of scientists that had been called to the Hearing Room. One of them was Zach's mother, Dr. Jacinta Yamoto. She appeared grim and worried.

"Hard to tell exactly why, though," Zach told Sean, via the current. "She's got at least fifteen different things to be worried about right now, so don't read too much into it n

"All right, Sean," said the scientist in the center of the group, a tall man named Danzing. "Please tell us why you think your group was chosen as the contact point for the quufers."

"There are two reasons," replied Sean. "The first is nothing more complicated than distance. For reasons I don't completely understand, the first contact was made easier by the device we discov-

ered on the plateau—the one that showed us what the earlier civilization here had been like."

"And the second?"

"Age," said Sean. "It's not easy for the quufers to send messages into our heads—human intelligence and quufer thinking operate in very different ways. The fact that we were younger, still changing, made it easier for them to work with us than with adults. But we were too old for them to make a full link, though they were able to do a little more work on me after Barrett smacked my brains around. Anyway, that's why they took Ginny. They're desperate to communicate with us, and the only people they can really get through to are those with open or uninfluenced minds, like Gin-ny's or mine and my friends'."

The scientists looked disturbed. "Are you saying that animals were tampering with the infant's brain?" asked a short, hook-nosed man.

Sean hesitated. That was indeed what he was saying, but it was clear the idea wasn't going to go over well. Now how do I answer this one? he thought desperately.

Dr. Yamoto helped him out. "Tampering is a loaded word, Henry," she cautioned. "I think you should let the boy speak for himself, rather than put words in his mouth."

The brief interruption provided enough time for Clea to send him a message. It amused Sean to think that while the scientists thought they were questioning only him, he actually had access to the experience, thoughts, and ideas of the other seven teens in the Circle. Talk about people putting words in his mouth!

"It's like a language/' he explained carefully, using ideas Clea had picked

up from her psychologist parents. "You know, it's much easier to learn a language as a child than as an adult. This is a language, too. . . ."

He paused as he received a set of images from the quufers. Vm starting to feel like a radio set, he thought crossly. But it was clear he was going to need all the help he could get to convince the scientists of what he had to say.

"Sean, are you all right?" asked Dr. Yamoto.

Sean nodded. "Just trying to find the right words to explain this," he answered. "The quufers knew they could never establish full communication with adults. They wanted to provide Ginny with a language structure that would allow her to communicate with them as she grew."

Dr. Danzing shook his head. "Sounds like tampering with her brain to me," he declared ominously.

"That's assuming you buy this ridiculous story at all," said the scientist at the end of the table. "We all know the boy has suffered a severe head injury. He and the others have been constantly in trouble since they arrived here. This whole thing is a combination of delusion, fantasy, and blame-shifting."

"Test me!" shouted Sean. "I volunteered to be tested. Don't sit there and call me a liar. Test me!"

"That's what we intend to do," said Dr. Danzing calmly. "Though this will only be a preliminary test, of course."

"Of course." Sean's expression was unreadable.

The tall scientist raised his eyebrow, uncertain

whether he was being mocked. "Now, you claim you can communicate telepathically with the quufers," reiterated Dr. Danzing. "We have a quufer in the next room, along with one of our lab assistants. Can you tell me what the lab assistant is showing the quufer?"

Sean closed his eyes for a moment. "No."

"Aha!" cried the scientist at the end of the table.

"However," continued Sean, "if your assistant would move around the table, so that they're standing in front of the quufer instead of behind it, I could probably tell you what the item is. As it is, I can tell you that the quufer is thinking that this is extraordinarily silly, and wondering why it's supposed to believe that we're an intelligent species when we can't even tell one end of a quufer from the other."

Dr. Yamoto grinned, but her son sent Sean a message: 'Take it from someone who knows — wise-guy answers aren't going to do you any good in this situation. Guys like this don't think clearly when they feel attacked!"

"Right" replied Sean. 77/ try to remember that"

Dr. Danzing spoke into a small device he was carrying in his hand. Almost instantly, Sean received an image from the quufer.

"Your assistant—it's Marcy Kaufmann, if I'm not mistaken—is holding a card with four red squares on it"

A rustle of whispers passed among the panel of scientists.

"The quufer is a little confused," Sean added. "It can't figure out why

you're showing it something so simple if you're trying to test its intelligence.

Right now it's trying to figure out if the four red squares have some sort of hidden meaning. But it's probably going to start feeling insulted pretty soon."

"Very clever, Mr. Matthews/' remarked the scientist at the end of the table. "But I fail to see the point of this little show. It seems to me this is little more than a form of planetary-induced extrasensory perception—much the same as the telekinetic powers that young Mornette is beginning to show. Very interesting in and of itself. But certainly this does not prove anything about the intelligence of the quufers. Seeing through their eyes does not in any way indicate that they are an intelligent species. You can see through a window."

"Why are you so afraid to admit that they might be intelligent?" demanded Sean. Then, picking up on a thought he received from Will, he added, "There are plenty of uninhabited planets out there. We don't have to steal this one!"

Dr. Danzing banged his gavel. "This panel is adjourned until tomorrow morning," he said.

"No, I'm not going to cancel the party!" said Daphne as she and Will walked home from the hearing. "So what if we don't feel like celebrating right now? That's a good reason to have a party. We need it more than ever!"

"Okay, okay," Will surrendered, holding his hands up in front of him. "I just asked."

"Well, it's negative thinking," insisted Daphne, sounding somewhat mollified. "You should be asking what you can do to help."

"Okay," said Will. "What can I do to help?"

"Ah," she said, patting his cheek. "Now there's a sweet boy. My father and Mr. Oblitt are going to put up electronic barriers on the beach as soon as the tide begins to go out. Zach's going along, but they need one more pair of hands. Consider yourself drafted!"

"What do we need barriers for? We've had lots of parties down on the beach and never used anything like that."

"Precautionary measure," said Daphne bitterly. "No one will let their kids come unless we can assure them that they're not going to be eaten by bands of roving theskies."

"Oh, ackle," said Will.

"My sentiments exactly," agreed Daphne.

"I think he should go," Allison Matthews said determinedly. Sean gave his father an expectant look.

"I suppose you might as well," conceded the older man with a shrug. "There's nothing more we can do about the quufers tonight. And if your friends are willing to go to all the trouble to get you and your hoverchair down to the beach, you might as well take advantage of it. But you're not going out without some way to communicate with us. I'm going to install a transmitter in your hoverchair so you can call us if you get overtired and need to come home early."

"Oh, Dad," said Sean. But it was only a token protest.

It wasn't until later that afternoon that Sean finally figured out why his parents had relented in

the matter of the party. The truth was, if something didn't break soon, odds were good that the entire Matthews family would be heading out on a new assignment—one where his father would not be governor. He figured his parents had decided he might as well enjoy his friends while he could. The more he thought about it, the more Sean wondered if he would ever understand exactly what it had cost his father to stand up for him that morning.

Daphne DeVries stood at the edge of the beach and stared with dismay at the sparse turnout that had greeted her organizational efforts. "Cowards," she muttered bitterly to no one in particular.

"Aw, go easy, Daffy," said Will. "Most of the kids who didn't come aren't afraid. The problem is their parents."

"To whom did you think I was referring?" said Daphne regally. Then, as quickly as if she was taking off one mask and putting on another, she seemed to discard the angry mood. "Come on." She linked one hand through Will's elbow and used the other to hold down her fanciful white hat. "I don't care who else shows up. Let's go party!"

They trotted along the beach to where the others had congregated. In addition to the circle of eight, another thirty or forty teens had managed to obtain permission to attend the party. Four tables were spread with their favorite drinks and snacks; a fifth table featured a "Taste-at-your-own-risk" selection of the newest items being developed at the Greendomes.

Colored lights were strung from poles that Zach

and Will had anchored in the black sands earlier that day. A pair of speakers played music that had come in with the latest group of emigres. The glowing waves of Sanjo Bay rolled over the beach and then trailed out again, the phosphorescent water leaving a slowly fading film of light across the sand.

"Great party, Daffy," called Yadira Odetts, who was dancing with a boy named Madden.

Daphne smiled and waved.

They found the rest of their group at one of the snack tables, where Zach was holding forth with a typical story about the comic adventures of his younger sibs. When he had finished, Daphne turned off the music and used a pocket mike to attract everyone's attention.

"As you should know," she began, "the reason we're having this party is to celebrate the fact that with two new moons we have the darkest sky you'll ever see on Gauguin. The clouds have cooperated, the night is clear, and the tide is still receding." Extending one arm in a wide arc, she cried, "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the sky!"

At her signal, Will threw a switch that put out the party lights which had been rigged up along the section of beach. Daphne squeezed his arm as she heard cries of wonder and appreciation from all around them.

"It's perfect," said Will so fervently he might have believed she'd planted the stars in the sky herself.

She snuggled against him and stared up at the star-spattered sky.

Zach gazed up in astonishment. "It was never like this on Earth/' he whispered to Clea. "Never!"

He began to walk away from the group. Clea hesitated, then followed him as he walked to the edge of the water.

"The tide will be all the way out in another hour or so," he said thoughtfully. "Farther than we've ever seen it. We won't see much, though, with only starlight to show us the ocean floor."

"It won't make a difference of more than a few yards anyway, will it?" asked Clea.

"It depends," he replied. "We don't have complete soundings for the bay yet, but there's some indication of a broad, flat area out there. If that's so, it might actually be uncovered by a really low tide. Lots of area that hasn't seen air for years might be exposed. If it's sandy, or weedy, we probably couldn't get far. But if the seabed is rocky, we could walk across it. Actually, even if it's rocky, we probably shouldn't chance it. Could be sinkholes, or other things like that."

He stared out across the glowing waves and felt like something was tearing loose inside of him.

"Did you ever see something in a completely new way?" he asked Clea softly. "Something you've known for a long time, but not seen completely."

He barely heard her whispered answer, so transfixed was he by the planet and the sky. "It's so big," he murmured. "So empty. I can't get used to it— can't hold it all in my head. What we have here in Ambora is so tiny. How can those fools think they have even half an idea about what might be out there?"

He stared at the glowing waves, then looked up

at the blazing canopy of stars. The realization that the total human population of Gauguin was no larger than that of a single small town on Earth seemed to hold him pinned against the sand.

"No more than a town," he whispered. "It's as if we had to start from here and explore all of Africa, all of Asia, Europe, North America, South America. It could take hundreds of years. Think of it Clea— all the secrets, all the hidden places, all the mysteries. What we've done so far doesn't amount to anything more than scratching a mountain with your fingernail. There's just so much of it."

"You're scaring me," she said with a laugh.

"I'm scaring myself," he replied. "But it's the best kind of scared. It makes me ache with wanting things."

He turned to her. A breeze played through the ends of her brown hair. The outline of her face was just visible against the glowing waves. Hesitantly, he reached out and touched her cheek.

"Did you ever see something in a completely new way?" he asked again,

his voice thick with wonder.

"Just now," she whispered, stepping closer to him. "When I saw Gauguin through your eyes."

With a cry he pulled her to him, and tried to kiss the starshine from her face.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The Toppled Towers

Sean was the first to receive the message, of course, though Zach and Clea were close seconds.

The content was familiar. "Please come. Someone must bear witness."

He'd been aware of it for less than a second when Noriko, who had been sitting on the sand beside his hoverchair asked, "Are you picking it up?"

He nodded. "I have a sense that it's important, but not urgent. Yet there's a kind of fear underneath it. It's a little confusing. I'm not sure what's going on."

"One way to find out." Noriko gave him a meaningful look. "That is, if you're up for it."

"Why not?" said Sean. "I haven't been in trouble for at least three hours. Let's see what we can stir up."

"So you heard it, too," said Clea when she spotted Sean and Noriko making their way down the wet sand.

"Hey, we're all in the same circuit," Arkady remarked. He and Philippa were approaching the group out of the darkness. "Of course we heard it."

Will and Daphne arrived at the same time along with a large group of theskies.

"How did they get past the electronic barriers?" asked Will, nodding toward the theskies.

"Maybe they swam," said Sean, turning his hoverchair to face them. "Or maybe the tide has gone down farther than you expected when you helped put the barriers in place."

"However they got here, I think I know what they want us to do." Zach continued to stare at the creatures.

Before anyone could respond, Sean felt one of the theskies press its head up underneath his hand. He closed his eyes, and at once the night time world was revealed to him in a dazzling array of lights and colors.

"You know where we're going, don't you?" he whispered to the others.

"Straight ahead," replied Zach. "As far out as the tide will take us."

"Which is a fairly long way, from the looks of things," Philippa added.

Sean stared ahead in fascination. With the aid of the theskie pressing close to him he could "see" the pattern of land and water ahead of him. Much of the area was riddled with sinkholes, treacherous and unsafe. But stretching ahead of them, leading straight across the seabed, was a clear

strip of solid rock, so smooth and straight it might almost have been a road.

a Not almost," muttered Zach. "This was a road once."

Sean was not startled when he heard Zach answer his unspoken thought;

the current seemed stronger than ever.

They began moving forward.

It's just like that first night at the plateau, thought Clea. The call is so clear, so strong. How can the others back on the beach not hear it?

But those on the beach were soon lost from her thoughts, as all her attention became focused on the road ahead, the road that led across the seabed to—what?

The path was slippery. More than once Clea lost her footing, and at the same time her contact with the theskie guiding her. When that happened, the theskie would pause—: Almost as if it's waiting to see ifVm all right, thought Clea—and then nudge its head back under her hand.

Long expanses of water, vast glowing tidal pools below the level of the road bed, stretched to the right and the left. Far ahead they could hear the surge of the waves—and, Clea realized, something else.

"Stingers up ahead!" cried Daphne and Noriko together.

Clea shivered. The stingers—large, squidlike sea animals with poisonous tentacles—were potentially even more dangerous than the theskies. But they hadn't harmed Daphne and Noriko when they led them to the spot where the girls had their

vision of an underwater city—the spot where they had been initiated into the current.

After a while Clea realized that the sound of the stingers was almost like a song, yet one without words or melody, luring them forward—as if anything beside the call of the quufers was necessary.

"Look," said Zach who was walking close beside her. "The road bed is getting wider."

"More than just wider," added Sean. "Look ahead of you."

Clea felt a tingle across her arms as she saw what they had come to.

It was a city—or the remains of a city, remains hidden by the sea on all but this night, the night of the farthest tides. Now, with the water drawn away by the power of Justine and Juliette's combined gravity, Sanjo Bay had finally revealed its secret, a city that stood on what had once been Gauguin's shores, and was now underwater.

On the mountain plateau, the only artifact remaining from the city that had once stood there | had been the vision-inducing box of crystals—and that had been lost in the earthquake. Now they could see the foundations of once-great buildings, the enormous blocks of toppled, shattered towers; actual, physical remnants of what once had been. Solid proof, at last, that they had not been hallucinating.

Proof that they were not insane.

Proof that before the arrival of humans, Gauguin had been host to a great civilization which had crumbled and died no one knew how many eons before.

"Please," came the call. "Please. Someone must bear witness."

Clea turned. Behind them came a procession of theskies, a hundred, perhaps two hundred strong. Each theskie carried a quufer, holding it gently between its claws like some precious offering.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," said Sean, though no one had given any sign that they were about to panic.

"Look!" sang the quufers, in a song heard only inside the teenagers' heads. "Look, see, discover. Someone must bear witness."

The theskie that had accompanied Clea began to lead her across the broad expanse of the ancient city. The rocks were slimy beneath her feet, the stones and shards of the ancient buildings rounded and smoothed by the caress of countless centuries of underwater currents. But the shapes were still there. With the theskie as her guide, she walked between a pair of stones that had once framed a door. She cried out for a moment when the theskie bent its neck, breaking the contact so that she was lost in darkness, with only the glowing waves and the star-spattered sky for light. Then she felt the theskie place something in her hand.

The object, whatever it was, was covered with slime. But beneath the plant growth she could feel the curves and corners of something that was clearly not natural, something that had been made by the hands of an intelligent being.

She felt a great wrenching inside, as if her heart was being pulled back across the ages.

She realized, with a degree of shock, that the object she held was a toy.

And then, as if some hidden door to her mind had opened, she was overwhelmed by a flood of impressions and information.

She began to speak.

"This was the toy of Pirrim Karkut," she recited quietly.

Zach turned to look at her, as did the others in the group. She was staring straight ahead, not seeing any of them.

"Pirrim lived in this city, which was called Mondamar," she continued. "She lived with her mother, her father, and three brothers. Three quufers and six theskies lived with the family. They died, all of them, in the Final War, when the cybertanks rolled through the city and the Mindwhips began to lash."

Zach shuddered. He still had nightmares from the vision on the plateau, when he had seen the scaley, orange-skinned natives of Gauguin fleeing the horror of the Mindwhips. He had even, fleet-ingly, experienced the terror and madness that the Mindwhips brought on, but the actual memory was lost to him. It had been so horrible that his mind simply refused to let it come to the surface again. Now it was locked somewhere deep inside him. That it might escape again someday was one of his worst fears.

He was distracted from his frightening thoughts by Philippa, who was now speaking—bearing witness, as Clea had done.

"This was the entrance to the home of Siriri Mosso," Philippa said,

trancelike, standing with

her hand on a rounded, slime-covered rock. "She lived here in great happiness, until the day of the Final War."

"In this place was a garden," Arkady picked up the testimony. He stood with his hand on a theskie's neck, staring into the night as if he was blind. "It was tended by Miramo Moma, who loved it very much."

"What's going on?" wondered Zach. He was frightened, felt as though he had wandered into a clutch of ghosts.

*Ifs the quufers" Sean informed him via the current. "They've saved the past, and carried it within them. Now they're sending it to us through these artifacts. "

Zach remembered that during the vision on the plateau they had learned that the quufers and theskies were pets of the mysterious lost civilization of Gauguin.

Was this saving of memories a kind of loyalty? And what had happened to cause the quufers to develop such intelligence anyway? How long had it been since the terrible war that seemed to be the endpoint of all these memories?

Kneeling, he picked up a three-cornered object. Its original shape and colors were obscured by the slime that had accreted to it during its years on the bottom of the sea, but it carried a charge of meaning that seemed to shiver through his fingers.

"This is the memory we have saved, " whispered a thousand thousand voices in his skull.

An image began to take shape in his mind, a picture of an old woman, her scaley orange skin

withered by age. She sat in a chair with children at her knee. Her grandchildren, Zach realized.

That was one of the things that was so disturbing about these visions. These people, so strange looking they almost seemed to be monsters, were somehow very like his own people—mothers, fathers, grandparents, children. People who had pets, who went to work, who fought over little things, and then one day fought so fiercely and so terribly that they never fought again because they had been wiped from the face of the planet.

What did they fight over? he wondered. What was the cause of the war that had destroyed them? Was it important? Or was it something small, something stupid, like the situation that had led to the destruction of most of California on his old planet, Earth? What had caused this war?

The questions disappeared as he found himself overwhelmed with an urge to speak.

"This is the arm of the chair in which Mirili Minnani sat during the last days of the Old World. Here she sang and told stories, and cried as she watched the end come. This is where she sat when the cybertanks came and the Mindwhips lashed the world to madness."

The Mindwhips.

Zach shivered again at the thought of weapons that could reach inside your skull and turn the world inside out, making your friends appear to be enemies, twisting the face of love until it was seen as hate.

He looked at his hands but saw the hands of Mirili Minnani, and he quivered with the knowl-

edge of the terrible things the old woman had done after the Mindwhips touched her.

This, too, the quufers had remembered. As they remembered all that they had loved, so, too, had they saved the terror and the evil, witnessing everything in their effort to preserve a record of the people who had been their masters.

It was eerie to consider such a different form of intelligence, an intelligence directed not toward creation or conquest, but to conservation, to the saving of all that had been and all that would ever be.

A sudden fear overwhelmed him, a fear that came from the same source as the memories.

What was it? What were the quufers afraid of?

"They don't want it to happen again," said Clea.

Her voice startled him.

"Clea's right," Sean interjected. "They see in us the same thing that drove the first civilization here—drove them to build, and drove them to destroy. They don't want it to happen again."

"They're afraid of what we will do to the planet," added Will. "I think they've looked into our minds and have seen our other worlds."

"Hey, they're not all bad," objected Daphne.

"Maybe not," said Zach ruefully. "But if they ever got a good look at my memories of Earth, it probably scared them good."

A splash of cold water against his feet made him holler in surprise. "Uh-oh," he said. "Tide's coming in. We're going to have to get out of here soon."

"At least this time we'll be able to take back something to prove what we're telling people is the truth," Clea declared.

That's true," said Sean. "And it's a major relief. But I still can't shake the feeling that there's something else the quufers want from us. Can't you feel their fear, their uncertainty? Something is still bothering them."

Zach looked out toward the sea. "Well, it's going to have to wait for another time," he finally said. "For now, I suggest we all choose something to take back so we can get moving."

"Wait," Sean implored. "The quufers are asking us to form a circle."

Mumbling nervously, the eight joined hands. Noriko stood next to Sean. After she slipped her hand into his, the theskie that had been guiding her stepped back to wait behind her.

When the circle was formed, the message came to them, clear and frightening. As always, it was a mixture of images, feelings, and words. With Sean's help, the teens were able to translate it.

"A Mindwhip lies within a sinkhole not far from you."

With the message came the image of the Mindwhip—a long, slender rod attached to a backpack. It appeared simple, even innocent. But it held madness that could be broadcast into a living mind like a radio signal.

'This is the last Mindwhip we know of. We would prefer to leave it buried here. But we fear that once the city is discovered by others, the Mindwhip will eventually be discovered as well Your kind is clever with machines — too clever. If anyone were to find this tool we fear its terrible power will be used wrongly once again"

This last thought was cast with the use of an

image so powerful in its horror that the circle nearly separated as each of the viewers recoiled from the image they saw.

"If we guide you to the weapon, will you destroy it for us?"

To Clea's surprise, it was Sean who argued against them. "But we could learn new things from such an object," he thought. "Perhaps important things."

The quufers' reaction was so sharp and angry that no one needed Sean to help translate it. "The risk is not worth it!"

The horrible images of the effects of the Mindwhip were replayed. This time the group did break apart.

"Leave it," said Zach angrily, rubbing his temples. "The tide's coming in. Let's each grab something and get out of here. We can figure out what to do about the Mindwhip later. Several of us are pretty good at diving. If we decide to come back here and destroy the thing, we can."

Before anyone could answer, a new voice broke in on them.

"Well put, Zach," it said. "But a waste of breath, I fear. Considering all the trouble you kids have caused me over the last few months, I think I would just as soon have you stay here now."

Zach turned around. "You!" he cried in astonishment.

The newcomer grinned. "Your deaths will be a terrible tragedy, of course," he said. "But the colony will get over it. Considering all the harebrained things you've been doing, I doubt anyone

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will even be that surprised when you don't come back tonight."

"Hey, come on," said Zach, forcing a laugh. "This isn't funny."

"I'm not kidding," replied Marc Oblitt as he stepped forward and pointed a laser pistol at Clea's head.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Last Mindwhip

With his hand on a theskie's neck for sight, Zach could tell that their history teacher was wearing an infrared helmet that allowed him to detect their heat patterns in the dark. The visual power provided by the helmet was nowhere near as clear as that offered by the theskies. But Oblitt was not bound by a theskie. He could move wherever he wanted, unlike the teens, who would be virtually blind the moment they released their grasp on a theskie's neck.

"If any of you are thinking about getting heroic, you'd better forget it," said Mr. Oblitt. "I'm not alone."

Two shafts of light from the left and the right— quick bursts of laser fire —reinforced his words.

"Pieter Suvin," said Arkady, recognizing the man who had tormented first Sean and then himself

while the boys worked their drudge under his supervision.

"At your service," Suvin responded smoothly, raising the barrel of his laser pistol to his infrared helmet in a mock salute. He was standing at the controls of a hovercar. The machine was painted black, and it held none of the required markings of a registered colony vehicle.

Opposite Suvin, forming the third point of the enemy triangle that had entrapped them was another hovercraft. Standing at the controls was Krysteen Withard, the woman who had made life miserable for Philippa during a research expedition to the Covisles. Now that the teens were aware of her, Withard directed the hovercraft closer until she was directly behind Philippa. "I'll use this one as a hostage, Marc," she said, pointing her laser at the Alphorionite's head.

"See how tidy this is?" Oblitt sneered. "If any of you made a bad move, Krysteen will simply sizzle a line straight through Philippa's head—or 1*11 do Clea. No matter who moves, one of them is going to get fried. The same goes for the theskies: They move on us, we cauterize a couple of temporal lobes. Of course, I'd rather have your bodies all clean and unmarked. But we can cope with disposing of you in other ways if we must."

Sean felt himself reel under the current-borne rush of Arkady's anger, which was fueled by his fear for Philippa.

"Stay cool f Arkady" he cautioned, "or we'll never get out of this. "

Aloud, he said, "I suppose this may not be the wisest thing to ask, but what's the point of all thfs?

If you want to get rid of us, why didn't you just shoot us from behind in the first place and get it over with?"

"If you're just missing," explained Oblitt, "it'll be months before we get

any peace and quiet around here. I want your bodies to be discovered. And when they are—when they wash up on the shore— I want it to appear that you've died a natural death as a result of your own well-known recklessness and stupidity."

"Stupidity is right," said Zach. "Stupid to trust you." And then, as if it was just hitting him: "Trust you? We saved your life!"

Oblitt smiled, the familiar smile that once seemed so friendly yet now held nothing but menace. "Don't think I'm not grateful to you for that," he said. "But business is business, after all. And business says you kids have to go."

"Why?" asked Clea. Zach could sense her pain, the wounded feeling of betrayal by this man they had all trusted and cared for. "Why couldn't you have left us alone?"

"Me leave you alone?" scoffed Oblitt. "The problem was, you wouldn't leave me alone. Arkady was hot on my trail, with his computer trackdown of possible suspects. He probably would have nailed me within the next week. And if you hadn't found me out that way, you would have gotten it from the quufers and the theskies sooner or later. Those blasted creatures see everything that goes on around here. If you can really communicate with them —and anyone who doesn't think you can is a fool—then I could never have stayed hidden.

Sooner or later, you would have realized that I was in charge of the malium mining operation."

"And the one who told those thugs to have me killed," said Sean bitterly.

"Well, not without some regrets," said Oblitt cordially. "I really like you, Sean. It's just that youVe become terribly inconvenient."

"Do you really think you would have gone undetected if not for us?" asked Arkady.

Oblitt laughed. "For as long as I wanted! Teaching is the perfect cover for someone like me. No one pays much attention to teachers, unless they decide that the teachers are screwing up. As long as I did my work, I was almost invisible to the colony administration."

"Then why did you bother to stick up for us all those times?" Clea demanded.

"Well, for one thing, it was fun. After all, you're nice kids, and Santori is a jerk."

"Look who's talking," muttered Zach.

Oblitt waved a hand in dismissal. "I told you, Zach, this is business. If I had my way, I'd be glad to keep you around. But as things stand, you're really much too dangerous to me. Anyway, the other reason I stuck up for you was that it improved my cover. No one would think that a man with something to hide would draw attention to himself that way. Besides, it increased your trust of me, which made it that much easier for me to keep track of you."

"The others are going to realize that we're gone soon," Sean informed him.

Oblitt shrugged. "You're much too far from the beach for that to make any

difference," he said

indifferently. "No one would think to come out this far looking for you. By the time anyone starts to worry it'll be much too late."

Sean looked back. They had traveled farther than he realized. What Oblitt said was probably true.

The current was flooding him with anger and fear from the others. "Cool it!" he ordered. "We're on the edge of a feedback loop that will fry our brains and leave us useless. "

"What can we do?" demanded Zach.

"Hold tight," he signaled. "Vm working on it" Aloud, he asked, "How about a trade?"

Oblitt laughed. "What could you possibly have that would be of interest to me at this point?"

"An alien artifact."

"I can't see why I would need anything like that."

While Oblitt was answering, Sean tapped the current to talk to Daphne. "I need your acting skills," he told her. "I want you to resist me. Act surprised — angry!"

She tried to question him, but he turned his attention back to Oblitt.

"I haven't made myself clear, Marc. I know where there's a piece of functioning alien technology. It's not more than ten meters from where you're standing. But you'll never find it without our help. It's a weapon. Think of it— a working alien weapon."

Daphne came in right on cue. "The Mindwhip!" she gasped. "Sean, you can't—"

The others, silent, were sending him the same kind of message via the current.

11 Just wait!" he ordered. "I know whatlm doing!"

Daphne's seemingly spontaneous resistance put an edge on Oblitt's curiosity. "What's a Mindwhip?" he asked suspiciously.

"It's what won the last war on this planet," said Sean. "Simple looking thing—couple of meters long, no thicker than your wrist. But it broadcasts insanity."

"How do you know what it is?"

"The quufers told me. What about it, Mr. Oblitt? This is worth more than all the malium on the planet put together, and you know it."

Oblitt hesitated. "What's the deal?"

"I show you the weapon, you let us live. Take us into the hills. Tie us up. Hold us until your people can come and get you. You know you've got to get out of here soon anyway. We've already got things so stirred up that your cover won't last much longer."

"Sean, he'll never stick with the deal," thought Zach. "Give him the weapon and he'll only fry us"

7 know that!" replied Sean. "Stop interrupting me!"

Turning his attention back to Oblitt, he said, "Think about it. I won't make a move until you give the okay."

Oblitt hesitated, and Sean could sense the greed working within him, urging him to take a chance on what might be a trick, in order to gain the biggest prize of his lifetime. Finally, the teacher nodded. "You lead the way," he demanded.

"Of course," Sean contended. Touching a button on the arm of his hoverchair, he began moving across the face of the ancient city. As he traveled,

he sent the others an image of what he intended to do and warned them to be ready to move.

"Tell those theskies to stay back," warned Oblitt, sounding a little nervous. "I know you need one to see where you're going. But if any of the others get too close, you'll be the first to go."

They won't get near us," Sean assured him in a friendly tone. "They like me. They don't want anything to happen to me."

"Well make sure they understand that your good health depends on my good health."

"They know," said Sean as he steered his chair toward the spot the quufers had warned him away from. The theskie stayed at his left, walking where it was safe. The hoverchair, floating on its pressor beam, passed over the sinkhole without incident. But when Oblitt stepped onto the weak surface it gave way. His arms shot straight into the air and he cried out in surprise as he sank through the brittle crust of rock.

As alert as they were, Suvin and Withard were taken by surprise. It was only an instant before they recovered. But an instant was enough. Will and Arkady, well aware of what Sean was up to, were not surprised at all. Roaring in rage, Arkady grabbed the front of Suvin's hovercar. Wrenching it upward with every bit of strength his Thetan muscles could summon, he dumped Suvin onto the slippery rocks. Instantly, the man was surrounded by theskies.

Suvin fired the laser pistol once. A theskie screamed and fell. Then Suvin himself was screaming in agony and terror as one of the theskies bit into his wrist, grinding bone and

tendon together and causing him to drop his pistol to the ground.

Withard, too, had fallen, though in her case it was because Will had used his telekinetic powers to wrest the gun from her grip. As it floated away from her, she lunged for it and fell over the edge of the hovercar. Philippa leaped at her, and after a brief struggle, pinned the woman's hands behind her back.

"Very nice," Noriko commented. "Though perhaps—"

Her words were interrupted by a scream unlike any they had ever heard as the world erupted into madness.

The Mindwhip had been activated.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Room for One More

Zach was stepping toward Clea when something ripped open a door at the bottom of his skull and let his nightmares out. He threw himself to the ground and began brushing desperately at the spiders crawling over his flesh—spiders that were as real, in his mind, as any that had ever existed in the real world.

He looked up and cried out in horror as he saw Clea begin to twist and bend, her arms stretching, her face distorting into a hideous mockery of anything human.

Deep inside him something was plucking at the insanity of the horror he had buried after the vision of the plateau, the vision that had revealed to them all the final, horrible deeds of an ancient people who had been driven to madness by the lash of the Mindwhip—a madness that had caused

them to see their most dearly beloved as their greatest enemies.

Part of him knew that this was all a hallucination, yet he was controlled by the illusion.

From deep within him, a tiny voice screamed out for sanity. Another part of him—vaster, stronger, almost overwhelming—was driving his arms to reach out and kill the monster that Clea had become in his mind.

His brain felt like it was being ripped in two.

Suddenly Zach became aware of a pain so intense it drove back the edges of the madness that was overcoming him. Turning, he saw an enormous, sluglike creature emerging from the sinkhole where Marc Oblitt had fallen. A wave of terror washed over him. He wanted to run, for the shore, the sea, anywhere to escape this torment.

And then, from the abyss of horror, a small, warm hand felt its way into his own, and a tiny island of sanity began to take form within the winds of madness blowing through his mind.

"Zach!" cried Clea. "Zach, can you hear me?"

He drew her to him, held her tight as the deformed creature crawled toward them. Horror seemed to flow from it in waves. Its decaying flesh was sloughing off as it neared. It screamed without ceasing, a piercing silent scream that could be heard only in the mind.

As the creature lurched toward them, Zach reminded himself that it was all an illusion. The monstrosity they were facing was actually Marc Oblitt, who was clutching the Mindwhip, lost in a madness far deeper and more painful than that which had been ripping at his own mind.

Death was all around, and the world was hot with pain as Zach and Clea clasped hands and ran toward their enemy.

Noriko opened her eyes. The world was dark. Where was her theskie? She couldn't see without her theskie.

She had hardly formed the thought when she felt the reassuring pressure of a scaly head beneath her hand. The world came back into view. She wondered how she had seen what had just happened without the theskie's help. Or had it all been a hallucination?

Sean responded to her thoughts almost instantly. u It was mostly hallucination. Anything you thought you saw was probably imaginary. Things you actually touched were probably real."

"You okay?" she asked.

He answered with the mental equivalent of a shrug. "Got other things to worry about" he communicated.

Noriko realized that she'd gotten turned around, and Sean's thoughts were coming from behind her. Clutching the theskie, she reeled about and saw Marc Oblitt sprawled across the rocks in front of the sinkhole. Zach and Clea knelt in front of him, cradling each other in their arms. Clea was crying. After a moment Zach staggered to his feet, then helped Clea up.

"Nice work, heroes," said Sean softly.

"No, thanks." Zach's voice sounded shaky.

"What do you mean?" asked Sean.

"You can have the hero bit. I think I like being the sidekick better."

Sean laughed. "It's a dirty job/' he remarked. "But someone has to do it."

The eight teenagers had not gone more than ten meters with their captives when a small fleet of hovercraft arrived to escort them home.

"How did you know we were here?" asked Clea in astonishment.

"Sean told us," said Governor Matthews, who accompanied the group in the lead vehicle.

"You mean he can communicate telepathically with people outside the group?" demanded Daphne.

"Unfortunately—or fortunately—that's not the case," the governor replied with the slightest trace of a grin.

"Then how—"

"It was my electronic baby-sitter," interjected Sean. "They wouldn't let me come to the party without attaching a transmitter to the hoverchair, so I could contact them in case I got tired and wanted to leave. I was kind of peeved about the idea. But it came in handy when Oblitt showed up, and I just switched it on and prayed that someone was listening."

"We were," said the governor. "As a matter of fact, I have a feeling your mother recorded Oblitt's entire confession. I was too busy gathering the troops to hear everything."

"Fortunately, we have a pretty good emergency action system," said Commander Yamoto, who was behind Governor Matthews, piloting the hovercar. "Now, let's save the rest of the talk for later.

The tide's coming in pretty fast, and I want to get you kids out of here

now" No one argued.

"The current is nice," said Daphne, stretching her arms and flipping her magenta hair out behind her. "But I really prefer getting together like this. Otherwise it's like having a multiple comm-link inside your head. Lots of nice talk, but it doesn't feel like anyone is really there."

"I'll second that," said Clea. She snuggled against Zach, who pulled his arm more tightly around her shoulder.

The eight teens sat at the top of the cliffs of Sanjo Bay, staring down as the waves crashed against the black sand beach. Gauguin's blue sun, halfway into the morning sky, sparkled on the water.

"Amazing to think there's an ancient city out there, hidden beneath those waves," Philippa murmured.

"You know, that city is going to mean big changes here," Sean informed them. "Dad was talking about it at breakfast this morning. It won't be long before this place is crawling with exobiol-ogists and historians and archaeologists and space-knows-what other brands of academics, all wanting to be part of the effort to reconstruct Gauguin's first civilization."

"And that doesn't count the specialists that will be coming here to study the quufers," added Arkady. He sighed. "I think our quiet little world is about to get very busy."

"Our quiet little world has never really been

very quiet," observed Zach with a laugh. "But this scientific effort worries me. What if that Mindwhip is found?"

"It won't be," said Sean.

"You seem mighty confident about that Matthews," commented Noriko. "Been talking to quufers again?"

"You know," he said, smiling, "some of my best friends are quufers. Anyway, the problem with the Mindwhip was that the quufers knew it was there but they couldn't get at it. As soon as Mr. Oblitt pulled it out of the sinkhole, it was fair game. The stingers have already dragged it out into the ocean. They're going to dump it into the same trench where they put the rest of the weapons. Being four miles deep, the water pressure at the bottom should effectively crush the thing."

"What do you mean, 'where they put the rest of the weapons'?" asked Daphne.

Sean laughed. "It turns out that after the Final War, our fluffy little friends detoxified the entire planet. It took them a couple of centuries to do it, but every Mindwhip and every Cybertank was disassembled or disabled in some way. Of course, they didn't do that until after they developed intelligence."

"That must have taken nearly forever," said Zach. "Intelligence couldn't evolve quickly."

"Well, we had some special conditions here," said Sean. "Horrible as the Mindwhips are, they had an unexpected side effect: They stimulated mental growth in the quufers."

"So even though the war destroyed the first

intelligent species on Gauguin, it helped create the next one?" inquired Will.

"You've got it," Sean said.

"I want to know what happened with Oblitt last night," Noriko said, an expression of distaste on her face. "How could he have known how to work that thing?"

"He didn't," answered Zach. "At least, not that I can make out. I spent a lot of time discussing this with my mom. It's all theory, of course. But we figured the Mindwhip held some kind of psychoactive charge that had remained dormant all this while. When Mr. Oblitt fell into that sinkhole and touched it, the result was about what you would get if you touched a live wire—except that it was psychological instead of physical."

"But what about you?" asked Arkady. "How did you and Clea manage to get past the hallucinations to knock the thing out of Oblitt's hands?"

"Empathy," said Clea.

"Oh, please," moaned Noriko in an exaggerated tone. "Are you going to tell me we were saved by your bleeding hearts?"

"You can't drop kick a hallucination," said Zach. "If it wasn't for our bleeding hearts, you might be out there at the bottom of that bay right now."

"Okay, okay, so tell us how you did it."

"I don't know that we had much choice," said Clea. "As soon as Mr. Oblitt grabbed that Mindwhip, he was thrown into incredible mental agony."

"So were we!" exclaimed Will.

"True. But believe me, his was worse," Clea replied. "Anyway, he wasn't trying to use the Mind-

whip against us at that point. But while our fears were for ourselves, our empathic sides got tied into him. I'm guessing that the Mindwhip stimulated our empathic abilities along with everything else. We all saw that illusion of a giant slug come lurching out of the hole. But Zach and I also saw—or felt—Mr. Oblitt inside of it."

She shivered and continued, "I never sensed such agony. Despite what he was going to do to us, we couldn't leave him that way—though it took both of us holding on to each other to find the courage to break past the hallucination and knock the Mindwhip out of his hand."

"Actually," Zach broke in, "I was less scared of the image than of the thought that when we tried to break his connection to the Mindwhip, we might end up tied to it ourselves."

"So we owe our lives and our sanity to your empathy," said Noriko. She rubbed her shoulders, thinking of her last vision of Marc Oblitt, his face twisted in terror as he lay on the stretcher, lost in a coma. She knew the horror in his face would haunt her dreams for a long time to come. But they would only be dreams. For Marc Oblitt, the nightmare was alive and real. And though she didn't know for sure, Noriko had a feeling it was going to go on

for a long time to come.

"As a matter of fact, you do owe us," Zach said. "But don't worry, we're willing to collect on the installment plan."

He lay back on the grass, luxuriating in the warm sun against his skin, the closeness of the circle of friends, and most of all, the warm, en-

riching presence of Clea. He felt as though his heart might burst with the wonder of it all.

"Mighty nice to have a little peace and quiet/' he murmured. "I wonder how long it will last."

"Ack!" called a raucous voice behind him. "Ack, ack, ackle!"

"Oh, shut up," said Zach sternly to the theskie. "I have some serious loafing to catch up on!"

Zach's right, thought Sean later that afternoon after they'd all gone their separate ways. A little peace and quiet is just what the doctor ordered.

Closing his eyes, he leaned back in his hoverchair and relaxed.

The whirling lights were there to greet him. "Welcome," they whispered. "Welcome, welcome."

Eagerly, they invited him to visit the cities of the mind. But, as before, Sean resisted. "A moment," he said. "I want to find my friends. "

He had improved with practice. Their images came to him more quickly than ever. He surveyed with pleasure the net of light that bound them all, and noted the strength of the individual bonds within the net, the lines of light connecting each to the other, but most especially defining the couples that had evolved within the group. The crackle of blue between himself and Noriko was much stronger than before. Arkady and Pippa, Will and Daffy, even Zach and Clea—all had power and energy and joy flowing between them.

It took a moment for Sean to realize that the circle was one larger than it should have been.

"Whose aura is that?" he thought in alarm.

He focused on the light. It was small but intense,

a burning point of green that seemed hungry for the lights of the others, aching to connect with them.

"Who?" he thought again, and then the quufers sent him the answer, and he didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

"Ginny, " he thought. "Virginia Dare Sacajawea Riedel-Mornette. Welcome to the circle of light, little one."

The light glowed, as if it could understand his thoughts.

Sean sighed. It looked like life was about to take a turn for the interesting again.

"Zach, are the children frightened?" the ship's captain asked.

"Not yet," Zach said.

Captain Tremain nodded. "Move quickly, then," she ordered. "Get back to the forward compartment and get the kids out of it. We're going to have to counterflood it."

"Flood it! Why?"

"We're taking water in the port quarter, and we need to restore trim to rebalance the ship, more or less. Don't worry, the ship will float just as well with two compartments full of water. We'll take the kids to sick bay, which is most secure right now. You'll have to take them out over the weather deck."

That didn't sound good. "What's a weather deck?" Zach asked.

"Topside—the deck that's open to the sky. You'll have to go back that way, and don't even think of risking it without a lifeline!"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I want those children safe in sick bay as soon as possible."

"Yes, ma'am."

Out on the weather deck, the wind howled even louder. Zach clung to the doorframe for a moment. The rain lashed and stung his face; it was hard to see. Above, the mylar sails flapped raggedly in the wind. As he watched through blurred eyes, one sail sagged, belled out, and started to rip triangularly from one end to the other. Mylar ripping? The stuff was almost indestructible!

The ship heeled over. For a moment, he thought he was going into the water, but the lifeline held. / have to get to Clea and the children, he told himself grimly.

When he finally reached the compartment, he noticed the atomosphere was thick. Clea had her arm through one of the handholds as she hugged a small girl named Deidre to her, dressing the child without taking off her little preserver. Charlie and Rickey were already dressed and back in their hammocks, and Jeannie was stubbornly dressing herself. Only Orson, the youngest, was waiting to be helped. Six frightened pairs of eyes turned to him as he struggled damply through the door. He hadn't even noticed how wet he was getting.

"The captain said we've got to move," he gasped as the wind settled down to a steady moan. "She wants to flood this compartment. Clea, you finish with Deedee; I'll help Orson. Get all the little bits and pieces packed up—"

"Already done," Clea said briefly. She nodded at the packs tied to handholds along the bulkhead.

"Oh, good. Is anybody—that is, does anyone feel sick?"

Deedee nodded vigorously. "We all did."

"But we won't be," Jeannie added as she pulled her boorman over her head.

"Why not?"

"I already passed out the medicine," Clea answered.

Zach blew out his breath in an explosive sigh. "Well, that was good thinking. So now all we have to do is rig lifelines and get moving, Captain Tremain says."

"Mr. Zach?" Orson's small voice stopped him.

"Yes, Orson?"

"Are we going to sink?"

"We're gong to be fine, Orson," he said firmly. It's all up to Captain Tremain and the crew now. Our job is just to stay out of the way."

It wasn't going to be fun getting them all across that bare deck, he thought. Maybe they should try it one at a time, but Clea vetoed that idea.

"It would take too long," she said firmly.

"So we go together," Zach said. The ship listed at an almost steadily held thirty-degree angle, he noticed; the deck never quite came level. "And we'd better take the hammocks. One at a time, each of you kids get up and come to me. That's it, Charlie, you first. Over near the wall. Grab hold of the bulkhead by your pack. Then Clea will unsling your hammock, roll it up, and pass it to you so you can put it in your pack."

It was a good thing the hammocks were lightweight and compressible. Clea got each child out and steady, and passed them one by one into his

arms. He checked the preserver on every small, warm body, and saw to it that each lifeline was properly fastened. Orson was a problem—he was so small, he'd be a weak link if they put him in the middle, but they didn't want to leave him on the end. Finally Clea fastened him to herself with a spare line and took up her position at the end of the chain of children. By now, the captain and two crew members were waiting with the equipment necessary for pumping water into the compartment. No one said a word. Zach took a deep breath.

"All right, gang, let's go," he said. "Captain, if you'd fasten the door for us —thanks. Stick close to the inside of the deck, everyone, and hang on tight!"

The children chain followed him out the door, up the ladder, and into the wind. There were two crew members with storm lines on the weather deck—silently he thanked both them and the captain for thinking of it. The storm now hit him full force. He heard the children and squeals; he felt Clea's astonishment and fear. We'll only be out for a few minutes, he said to himself, hoping she could pick it up and obtain some reassurance from the current. Just long enough to cross a few meters of deck

Orson had tucked his stuffed bunny, Rabbit, inside his preserver, with only the plush bunny ears peeking out over the vest. Somehow the toy slipped out of his preserver and across the slick, wet deck. Orson, his face white with terror in the uncertain light, reached for it with both hands, letting go of the handhold. The wind caught at his

small body, pulling him across the deck as if he, too, were a stuffed toy. The lifeline was too long! It wasn't going to catch—

"No!"Clea cried, and went after him. She twined one arm in the line that connected her to Orson, shortening it as she jumped, and fell over the child's body as she lost her own footing. Zach felt her frantic anger, her fear, as she and the boy slid along the deck. He yelled something incoherent, grabbing at a line as it snaked past him, watching as the nearer crew member swung after

the freely rolling pair and missed—watched helplessly for Clea's lifeline to go taut. Only it didnt, it wouldn't, not in time— what had he done wrong in tying them? She had Orson now, clutched tight in her arms, but the deck was too steep and slippery for her to stop them both from sliding.

"No," Zach whispered. Then he shouted, "No!" And he felt the heavy thud of agony like a flame in his own skull when her head caught the ship's railing, and her limp body, Orson still bound to it, arced almost gracefully into the sea.

The time: 2520

The place: **The planet Gauguin, a world of soaring mountains, glowing, phosphorescent seas, and glittering black sands. A world more beautiful—and more dangerous—than its colonists ever dreamed possible.**

While the mysterious mental current linking eight teenage colonists grows stronger, the visions tormenting Sean Matthews, their leader, are becoming more intense. And just as the colony is preparing to celebrate the first human birth on the planet, a new menace arises — one that will threaten the future of all life-forms on Gauguin.

The source of this weird power is revealed to Sean in another vision. He believes that what he has seen and heard is true. But will he be able to persuade the authorities to take action before the planet's entire population is doomed?

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